


**Using the Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework  
to Teach Rhythmic Solfege for Beginners**

Jason D. Jones

School of Performing Arts, Reinhardt University

**Author Note**

Jason D. Jones  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7554-1061>

## GRR Approach to Rhythmic Solfege

### **Using the Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework To Teach Rhythmic Solfege for Beginners**

Rhythmic solfege was the most challenging pillar of the Dalcroze approach for me when I began using the Dalcroze approach. Being fresh out of my undergraduate degree, I was well-versed with the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) approach to teaching. Classroom teachers often use this approach when teaching literacy; so, I applied it to musical literacy. According to Fischer and Frey (2014), the GRR approach, based on a combination of Piaget's Cognitive Learning Theory, Vygotsky's Social Cultural Theory, and Bruner's concept of scaffolding, is designed to transfer the learning responsibility from the teacher to the student. Through this transfer, students expand their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and control their learning. In this article, I describe the Gradual Release of Responsibility framework in music and apply it in rhythmic solfege.

#### **The Traditional Approach**

Many teachers are familiar with the traditional Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) approach because it is taught in most universities and used by most school districts. Pearson and Gallagher (1983) first used this term to describe the "transactional process that occurs in reading comprehension instruction as the control of an activity moves from teacher to learner" (Fischer & Frey, 2013, p. 2). This traditional approach is rooted in Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), in which a more knowledgeable other helps students complete tasks independently that they previously could not (Daniels, 1996). In addition, the traditional approach uses Bruner's idea of scaffolding, or "interactional talk between learners and skilled others," as a means to expand student ZPD (Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2005, p.4). Thus, in the "I

## GRR Approach to Rhythmic Solfege

do” stage, teachers think aloud how they work through a problem. In the “We do” stage, they guide students through the process of solving the problem by asking them questions, calling on individuals to complete part of the problem, and asking questions about the process, such as, “What comes next?” Finally, students practice independently and demonstrate their individual ability in the “You do” stage.

### **Revisiting Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework**

Although many scholars have re-envisioned the traditional GRR framework over the last 40 years, Fischer and Frey (2008, 2013, 2014) have focused their work on understanding how the gradual release of responsibility occurs as a function of knowledge building. Fischer and Frey (2014) believed that peer-to-peer collaboration was equally crucial to the learning process. Thus, these scholars added an additional stage between the “We do” and “You do” stages. Their GRR approach has four stages: a) focused instruction, b) guided practice, c) collaborative learning, and c) independent practice. In this article, I have labeled them: a) I do, b) We do, c) Ya’ll do, and d) You do alone. I have described each of these stages from a Dalcroze-inspired teacher’s point-of-view in the sections that follow.

#### **I do: The Modeling Stage**

In the Dalcroze class, during the “I do” stage, the teacher models the desired sound or movement for students. Modeling could take the form of singing the whole song for the class, echo singing, demonstrating a movement, or simply practicing directions. If students are learning or adding movement to a song, the teacher should sing the song all the way through before students begin singing. After the students demonstrate they know the song, the teacher then asks questions about the song. Figure 1 is an example of this stage.

## GRR Approach to Rhythmic Solfege

Since the students have already learned the song “Do at My Belly Button<sup>1</sup>,” the teacher and the students sing together. The teacher then demonstrates the movement that coincides with the major scale. The teacher then calls attention to their actions by calling attention to their feet. The teacher checks for understanding by asking students about their actions. Finally, the teacher thinks aloud their process for stepping and singing.

### Figure 1

*The “I do” stage in a rhythmic solfege lesson*

Objective: Students will be able to sing and show half steps when singing a scale.

I do:

- Teacher sings the previously learned song “Do at My Belly” and encourages students to join. On the ascending scale in the song, teacher walks a scale.
- Teacher asks, “What did I do with my body in the song? Let’s do it again and this time watch I do.”
  - Students answer, “You moved up when the song went up.”
  - Teacher praises student.
- Teacher models singing and stepping a major scale from do to do’ using small steps between mi-fa and ti-do’
- Teacher repeats this after saying, “This time, look at my feet while I sing and move.”
- Teacher asks, “What did I do with my feet?”
  - Ss answer, “You took regular and small steps.”

### **We do: Personalize the Instruction**

During rhythmic solfege activities, students and the teacher often participate in echo singing, group compositions, and inner hearing development activities. In the “We do” stage, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Notation for this song is in the Appendix

## GRR Approach to Rhythmic Solfege

teacher personalizes the learning process by asking probing questions and developing metacognitive skills. The teacher may ask higher-order thinking questions such as, How did you know? What comes next? or Why did you choose that movement? (Hanna, 2007). Teachers may also choose to have a “joint practice” (Bowgren & Sever, 2010, p. 45) by singing or moving with the students. Doing it together can increase student connection with teachers (Pitt & Hargreaves, 2015; Weinstein et al., 2016) and allow for a safe learning environment. Figure 2 continues the rhythmic solfege lesson in the “We do” stage.

### Figure 2

#### *The “We do” stage of a rhythmic solfege lesson*

Objective: Students will be able to sing and show half steps when singing a scale.

We do:

- Teacher praises students and says, “Let’s all step and sing together!”
- Teacher praises students. And repeats singing the scale.
- “This time, listen to my voice and step with me.” T sings and ss step.
- Teachers says, “How did you know when to take a small step?”
  - Students may say, “We were following you” or they may say, “Our voices took a small step.”
  - If they say the first answer, the teacher says, “Great job, but what did we do with our voices?”
  - If they say the second answer, the teacher says, “That’s right! Where did our voices take a small step?”
    - Students answer, “mi and fa. Ti and do”
    - Teacher praises students

In this example, the teacher helps students develop metacognitive skills and checks for understanding by asking questions, observing, and listening. The teacher then provides crucial

## GRR Approach to Rhythmic Solfege

feedback to students. If possible, the teacher can also help students develop self-assessment skills. These formative assessments are essential for student success in the collaborative stage.

### **Ya'll Do: Collaborative Learning**

During this stage, students learn from each other under the supervision and coaching from the teacher. Some examples include solving a problem, giving each other feedback, and creating or arranging music. One of the primary objectives of rhythmic solfege is to develop inner hearing skills. This can be challenging for young children, so support from peers can be essential to avoid frustration. Figure 3 is an example of using peers as feedback and support. The students work with two different peers to maximize collaborative skills. In addition, the students practice receiving and giving feedback.

### **Figure 3**

Objective: Students will be able to demonstrate progress of inner hearing skills by listening to peers sing and stepping half and whole steps.

Ya'll do:

1. Teacher reviews walking and singing a scale.
2. Teacher pairs students together labeling one "the watcher" and the other "the mover."
3. Teacher says, "I'm going to sing a scale. 'The mover' will step and sing and 'the watcher' will watch and see how to 'the mover' does. Then 'the watcher' will give 'the mover' feedback."
  - a. The teacher listens to the feedback from "the watcher."
  - b. Teacher says, "Let's do it again. Try to fix your mistakes."
4. Switch roles
5. Teacher now pairs students with new partners.
  - a. Teacher and students decide who will be "the watcher" and "the mover"
6. Teacher says, "Now I'm going to sing only part of the scale. 'The mover' will move and 'the watcher' will watch."
  - a. Teacher sings → do-re-mi-fa-sol (twice)

## GRR Approach to Rhythmic Solfege

### *The “Ya’ll do” stage of a rhythmic solfege lesson*

#### **You Do: Independent Practice**

The “You do” stage provides opportunities for students to perform the task independently using the model and guided learning as points of reference and the feedback and practice from collaborating with peers. While students are performing independently, the teacher formatively or summatively assesses to gauge student success. The teacher also provides feedback and coaching to scaffold the learning process further. Figure 3 demonstrates the “We do” stage for the rhythmic solfege lesson.

#### **Figure 4**

### *The “You do” phase of a rhythmic solfege lesson*

Objective: Students will be able to sing and show half steps when singing a scale.

You do:

1. Teacher says, “Now it’s time to sing the scale on your own. Remember where the small steps are”
2. Teacher says, “Let’s practice together one more time.”
  - a. Students sing and step the scale on their own as a class
    - i. As the students sing, the teacher observes and takes notes on students’ ability to show half steps

### **Conclusion**

The Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) framework can be helpful for Dalcroze teachers. The four systematic stages provide students a model, personalize instruction, promote peer-to-peer collaboration, and allow the teacher to see what students have learned. The teacher becomes less controlling and more like a facilitator, coaching students through metacognitive

## GRR Approach to Rhythmic Solfege

questions and collaboration. This systemic approach helped my student become independent thinkers and established a thinking process that they could apply to other rhythmic solfege lessons. Thus, it paved the way for them to be lifelong musicians.

### References

- Bowgren, L., & Sever, K. (2010). 3 steps lead to differentiation. *Journal of Staff Development*, 31(2), 44-47,58.
- Burns, A., & de Silva Joyce, H. (2005). Explicitly supporting learning: An overview. *Teachers' voices*, 8, 2-7.
- Daniels, H. (Ed.). (1996). *An introduction to Vygotsky*. Taylor & Francis US.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). Homework and the gradual release of responsibility: Making responsibility possible. *English Journal*, 98(2), 40-45.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2013). Gradual release of responsibility instructional framework. *IRA Essentials*, 1-8.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2014). *Better learning through structured teaching: A framework for the gradual release of responsibility*. ASCD.
- Hanna, W. (2007). The new Bloom's taxonomy: Implications for music education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 108(4), 7-16.
- Kirschner, S., & Tomasello, M. (2010). Joint music making promotes prosocial behavior in 4-year-old children. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 31(5), 354-364.
- Pitt, J. & Hargreaves, D. (2017). Attitudes towards and perceptions of the rationale for parent-child group music making with young children. *Music Education Research*, 19(3), 292-308. doi: [10.1080/14613808.2016.1145644](https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2016.1145644)
- Weinstein, D., Launay, J., Pearce, E., Dunbar, R. I., & Stewart, L. (2016). Group music performance causes elevated pain thresholds and social bonding in small and large groups of singers. *Evolution and human behavior: official journal of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society*, 37(2), 152.



Appendix  
Song used in Figure 1.

## Do at My Belly Button

Arr. Jason Jones

Do at my bel-ly but-ton. Re like a roof top. Mi is flat. Fa thumbs down.

5

Sol like a gate. La like a mon - ster. Ti points up to

8

Do, high Do. Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do

The musical score is written in 4/4 time on a single treble clef staff. It consists of three lines of music. The first line contains 8 measures of music with lyrics: 'Do at my bel-ly but-ton. Re like a roof top. Mi is flat. Fa thumbs down.' The second line starts at measure 5 and contains 4 measures with lyrics: 'Sol like a gate. La like a mon - ster. Ti points up to'. The third line starts at measure 8 and contains 4 measures with lyrics: 'Do, high Do. Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do'. The piece ends with a double bar line at the end of the third line.