



Developing Musicianship through Improvisation: An Eclectic Teaching Module for Pre-school Children

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Abstract

In order to develop musicianship skill of pre-school students, the researcher as a teacher developed an eclectic teaching module that adheres to the philosophies found in Kodály, Dalcroze, and the Orff approaches. Improvisation was used as a tool for developing musicianship. From this action research, students learned through active music making for twelve lessons. Each lesson contained the development of six skills, including keeping a steady beat, improvisation elements identification, rhythmic imitation, rhythmic improvisation, melodic imitation, and melodic improvisation. Every lesson, students had got a new pair of contrasting elements and used them with all those six skills. The contrasting materials included long/short sounds, high/low sounds (sol/mi), same/different patterns, sound and silent signs, backward patterns, loud/soft sounds, louder/softer sounds, fast/slow speeds, faster/slower speeds, and staccato/legato signs. A rating scale with five-point continuous criteria was used for pre-tests, post-tests and improvisation assessments. Video recording was used to document all students' activities and make assessments of observed behaviours. Three teachers, who controlled all assessments, were observed for research reliability. The findings demonstrated that all ten students had improvement on all six objectives. The mean post-test scores were higher than the mean pre-test scores. The students demonstrated the understanding and enhancing of musical foundation, which included two aspects of improvisation skill, rhythmic improvisation and melodic improvisation. The most improvement skill was a keeping steady beat, followed by rhythmic improvisation, melodic improvisation, melodic imitation, rhythmic imitation, and improvisation materials identification.

Keywords: Musicianship, Improvisation, Eclectic Teaching Module

Introduction

“The students’ levels between three and seven are educationally much more important than the later ones. What is Spoiled or omitted at this age cannot put right later on. In this years man’s future is decided practically for his whole life time” (Choksy,

1981).

The teaching module originated with the aim of developing young children’s musicianship. In the researcher’s experience in teaching young children over many years, it has been found that beginning teaching children at an early age is very beneficial.

At young ages, children learn intuitively and naturally (Cambell & Kassner, 2002). Musical nurture and embedding young students with good musical experiences will bring them to be good musicians. Musicianship is the most essential skill that musicians must have. It is a combination of musical thinking and intuitive sense of pitch, rhythm, harmony, musical expression, texture, and timbre of music that can be developed and taught (Spencer, 2000; Young, 1990). It is a deep understanding at the core of music (Fung, 2003). The researcher defines çMusicianshipé from the literature review as the totality of musical abilities, learning, experiences, skills, creativities, understandings, which includes accumulation of music-making, learning, experiences, skills, understandings and musical problem solving for the purpose of being a foundation in communication, interpretation, expression and creation of music. To develop musicianship, teachers should be concerned about the musical areas, of singing, moving, listening, performing, creative thinking (composing and improvising), and music literacy (reading and writing) (Campbell & Kassner, 2002; Flohr, 2005; Flohr & Trollinger, 2010; Forrai, 1990; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). It is an inductive process and should be continually developed otherwise it disappears (Campbell & Kassner, 1995). To reach competency, proficiency, and artist level, students should develop practical understanding through actions or music making (Elliott, 1995; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

Improvisation used as a tool for developing musicianship in this research. Improvisation provides students with clearer understanding of music (Mead, 1994). To improvise, students must have musical understanding such as melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, and form for use as a fundamental to create music (Frazee, 1987; Gordon, 2008; Laitz, 2003). Developing children's musical creativity expands the process of developing children's musicianship (Elliott, 1995). As stated above, improvisation develops musicianship. Moreover, it develops inner hearing and

audiation (Gordon, 2003; Hallam, 2008; Laitz, 2003), develops imagination and practical musical thinking (Beegle, 2006; Chyu, 2004; Gordon, 2003; Mead 1994), develops confidence, concentration, and reinforces self-expression (Chyu, 2004; Laitz, 2003; Mead, 2003), and finally it presents what students have learned or understood both in musical concepts and learning skills (Azzara, 2002, 2008; Dairianathan, 2003; Gordon, 2007; Mead, 1994; Stringham, 2010). Teachers can assess students' achievement through the improvisation skill (Azzara, 2008).

Every teacher knows that early musical environment plays an important role in children's lives. Even young children can participate effectively in creative music activities. Therefore, they should be nurtured and embedded with the creative skills as early as possible to develop them to be complete musicians (Chyu, 2004; Hallam, 2008; Laitz, 2003). Teachers should provide readiness for students to teach themselves to improvise because the improvisation cannot be taught. Students learn through musical activities and collect musical vocabularies including tonal patterns, rhythmic patterns, melodic patterns, and harmonic patterns. Then they use their experiences and vocabularies to create and structure their improvisation works (Gordon, 2008). The following activities are the techniques for giving young children experience with improvisation activities: a) repetition or imitation, b) exploration with contrasting elements such as pitch (high and low), dynamics (loud and soft), rhythmic patterns, and articulation (legato and staccato), c) changing some note values (duration) of rhythmic patterns d) changing some pitch or pitch and duration on melodic patterns, and d) question and answer (Azzara, 2008; Chyu, 2004; Gordon, 2008). Other things that teachers should be concerned with when developing a music program for pre-school age or first-grade students include: a) unaccompanied singing, b) moving with music, c) work on developing skills in rhythm and beat, d) discriminating between comparatives such as fast and slow tempi or soft and loud dynam-

ics, e) ear-training and musical memory, and d) listening skills (Chosky, 1981).

According to researcher's experience of teaching, I have found that there are many students, who still have insufficient sense of music. They can play the music but cannot feel or listen to what they are performing. They learn by memorize what teacher teaches or plays without understanding. The music that they present is the copy of their teacher. Students are not encouraged to use their creativities and some teacher does not know how to relate it in the lesson. Although, improvisation is an essential component of music but the development of comprehensive improvisation skill is absent from the music curricula (Azzara, 2002; Chyu, 2002; Kratus, 1990). Mostly teacher emphasizes on developing techniques and expanding repertoires (Azzara, 2002; Chyu, 2002; Kratus, 1990). The curricular resources that support improvisation instructions are insufficient. While there have been many studies, which related to teaching improvisation, but none of which are similarly to this approach. This study was originated according to realization to the values of developing musicianship. It provided an alternative teaching module for teacher to teach improvisation for young children based on the principle that improvisation is the valuable tool to develop musicianship. It was the combination of a) researcher's experiences in learning and teaching, b) constructivist theory of learning, philosophies, principles, ideas, tools of Dalcroze, Orff, and Kodály methods, and c) literature review. Theses were materials for developing teaching module for young children at between the ages of five to six with the purpose of developing musicianship through improvisation. Additional, it produced some benefits such as a) students provided and experienced with improvisation devices. It presented students some techniques, which they could choose to use in their creative works, b) it provided creative experiences through a variety of activities, and c) it may enhance student's understanding on the musical foundation and

develop musicianship.

Objectives

This objectives of this research were a) to develop an improvisation teaching module designs to enhance musicianship of young children at the ages of five to six, b) to examine the effectiveness of the teaching module to students' rhythmic improvisation and melodic improvisation skills, and c) to examine the effect of improvisation to musical foundation.

Methodology

This study was an action research. An eclectic teaching idea was brought to use for developing teaching module on this research. Through this approach, teacher can encounter with all kinds of students. Teacher has flexibility to teach and has more principles, tools, techniques, and tactics to choose and apply for his/her teaching, which responses more to individual student. This teaching module was developed under the philosophy of the three teaching approaches include Dalcroze, Orff, and Kodály approaches. Early childhood education, learning by doing, developing musical competency and musicianship, and developing improvisation these are the same idea that all those methods adhere. The sequence of teaching and learning of this teaching module was adapted from the Orff's process of learning. Students started to learn through imitation to exploration, to experience, to literacy, and then move to creation. Furthermore, researcher adapted some teaching tools include hand-signs and rhythm syllables from Kodály approach and eurhythmic from Dalcroze approach. Pretests, posttests, and behavioral observation were conducted for gathering students' achievement. Three judges used a rating scale with five-point continuous criteria enable competencies dimension, a five-point continuous criteria fundamental aural discrimination dimension, and five-point continuous criteria creative thinking skill (improvisation) to measure student's musical foundation and improvisation skills. The con-

tinue criteria are hierarchical order. Researcher designed these three dimensions of this rating score from 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, to 5. The judges independently rated students' performance and record the score. Data Analysis consists of assessment of research data from pre-tests, post-tests, the behavioral observation records of each week, and video recordings. The researcher first, compares assessment scores in the aspect on the comparison of the mean pre-test and post-test score on a) each lesson of individual student's, b) each objective including keeping steady beat, identify improvisation materials, rhythmic imitation, rhythmic improvisation, melodic imitation, and melodic improvisation, of individual student, and c) each objective of ten students. All the comparisons of the mean scores were related with the data from behavioral observations. The researcher analyzes all data by concerning about students' background.

Results and Discussion

The teaching module

Based on the literature review and the information mentioned above, the teaching module was organized in two parts: a) musical foundation and b) improvisation. The musical foundation part was used for presenting the ideas that students can use as material for their creative works (rhythmic improvisations and melodic improvisations). It consists of enable competencies and fundamental aural discrimination. The enable competencies include these following abilities: a) the ability to keep and perform steady beat in 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 times, b) the ability to imitate rhythmic patterns, c) the ability to imitate melodic patterns, d) the ability to perform rhythmic patterns backward, e) the ability to perform melodic patterns backward. The fundamental aural discrimination is the ability to notice differences of: a) pitches (high/low), b) rhythm (long/short and sound/silent), c) dynamics (loud/soft, louder/softer), d) tempi (fast/slow and faster/slower), and e) articulation (staccato/

legato). The materials were taught one at a time for each lesson. After students learnt and acquired these skills, students were encouraged to use the materials that they had been taught to improvise the rhythmic and melodic patterns.

According to this sentence "to improvise, students must have musical understanding" (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987; Gordon, 2008; Laitz, 2003), the ten students aged five to six who participated in this research had approximately two years of musical experience. IN the first year of their musical experience, the students attended music for young children course. The course provided students with various musical activities under the philosophy of Kodály, Dalcroze, and Orff, in which music is learnt through action. Students learnt how to move with music, to sing with hand-signs, to clap while saying rhythm syllables, to sense the beat, to coordinate body and mind, etc. When students finished that course, they moved to study in a group piano course with the researcher. In this course, students learnt basic piano skills, note values (♩, ♪, ♫, ♮, ♯), note readings, dynamics (p, f, and mf), articulation (staccato and legato), speed (fast and slow), time signatures (2/4, 3/4, and 4/4) and the ear training.

The teaching module was organized over twelve lessons of approximately 1.30 hours, once a week. At the beginning of each lesson, students had a pretest of about thirty minutes. Then they attended to musical activities in the classroom setting for about an hour during which posttests were conducted through the classroom activities. The pretests and posttests were conducted in almost every lesson. The ten students were provided with musical activities and experiences that included the following six objectives: a) keeping steady beat, b) improvisation materials identification, c) rhythmic imitation, d) rhythmic improvisation, e) melodic imitation, and f) melodic improvisation. Assessments took place every fourth lesson (in lessons four, eight, and twelve). These assessed the understanding and students' ability to choose the material

that had been taught from the last lessons for creating their rhythmic improvisations and melodic improvisations.

The first objective was keeping a steady beat. Through this objective, students learnt to sing various traditional songs in a group while clapping the beat and performing down and up beat in 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 times. The traditional songs that were used in this teaching module were famous songs that students may have heard before. The songs in the first four lessons were in 2/4 times. They were “Bingo” and “London Bridge”. The next four lessons were in 3/4 times. The song used on these four lessons was *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*. Finally, the last four lessons were in 4/4 times using *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. This basic skill facilitated students in their imitations and improvisations.

The second objective was improvisation materials identification. In this objective, students were expected to discriminate between two contrasting materials. One pair of material was presented in each lesson and those materials were used as a tool for students’ tasks on the other four objectives, which were rhythmic imitation, rhythmic improvisation, melodic imitation, and melodic improvisation. The first lessons presented long/short sound (♩, ♪) for using rhythmic patterns and high/low sound (sol/mi) for using with melodic patterns. The second and third lesson presented same/different patterns and sound/silent (♩, ♪, ♯) respectively. Although the fourth lesson was an assessment, it presented doing backward. The other two assessments in lessons eight and twelve did not present any materials. The fifth, sixth, and seventh lesson presented loud/soft, louder/softer, and fast/slow respectively. The ninth and tenth lesson presented faster/slower and staccato/legato. The eleventh lesson was a review, and therefore no new material was presented in this lesson.

The third objective was rhythmic imitation. Imitation is the activity that teaches students to memorize musical patterns and immediately present them

back. Students learn to concentrate on the pattern that teacher or their friends perform and try to copy it thoroughly in as much detail as possible. The teacher clapped the rhythmic pattern with one of the two materials used in the lesson and then students imitated it using the same material. For example, if the teacher clapped the rhythmic pattern with loud sound, students should clap it back with correct rhythmic pattern and clear dynamics.

The fourth objective was rhythmic improvisation. A question and answer technique was used as the teaching tool for this objective. The teacher clapped the rhythmic patterns with one of the two contrasting materials used in the lesson as questions and then students were asked to answer it by using the other material. For example, if the teacher chose fast and slow speed to be material and clapped the rhythmic pattern with fast speed, then students should clap that rhythmic pattern back with slow speed. The rhythmic pattern itself was not changed. The changing depended on the materials, which were used in the lesson.

The fifth, and sixth objectives were melodic imitation and melodic improvisation. They used the same concept of teaching as the third and fourth objectives. A pair of contrasting materials was presented in the lessons and used for imitation and improvisation exercises.

Steps of teaching

This following paragraphs present the steps of teaching of twelve lessons and exemplify activities and materials that were used in each step. It may help and guide the music teachers about how to organize the lesson plan for their students’ creative works. This teaching module was only one teaching method that the researcher tried to develop for improving young children’s musicianship. Moreover, the participants of this research were the researcher’s students who had experiences and trained for over one years. Therefore, the teachers should concern about these. The

other thing that should be informed is the researcher believed in repetition therefore every lessons had the same steps of teaching; followed the six objectives. A new pair of contrasting materials was presented each lesson and it was used to be material to complete objective two to objective six.

At the beginning of the lesson, students had pretest about thirty minutes before the lesson started. Then they had a group activities for an hour, which the sequences of teaching followed the six objectives; from objective one to six. The posttest occurred while students doing their activities. The pretests and posttests were conducted every lesson for gathering data about students' development. Every activities were recored through VDO recording and all assessments were conducted by three assessors; the researcher and others two teachers under the same criteria. The criteria of assessment are as follow; 5 means student was completely accurate, 4 means student was nearly accurate with a minimum of misplace, 3 means student included a portion of accuracy and a portion of inaccuracy, 2 means student shows almost inaccuracy with only 20% accuracy placed, and 1 means student was completely inaccuracy.

As can be seen from figure 1, the students showed improvement on all six objectives. The most improved skill among the ten students was in keeping steady beat, followed by rhythmic improvisation,

melodic improvisation, melodic imitation, rhythmic imitation, and improvisation materials identification. This result showed that the teaching module completed the three purposes of this study and answered two research questions.

The first research question was "does the teaching module develop children's improvisation skills in the aspects of rhythmic improvisation and melodic improvisation?". The results of the study show that all ten students had an improvement in improvisation skills. Of six skills that were developed and assessed in this teaching module, rhythmic improvisation and melodic improvisation came second and third in terms of level of improvement.

The second research question was "does enhancing improvisation skills affect the musical foundation?". Developing the students' improvisation skills enhanced their in-depth understanding of the materials of music. Moreover, it raised their musical potentials. To improvise, students not only had to keep steady beat, identify musical materials, imitate rhythmic patterns, or imitate melodic patterns. They also had to use those skills to create their improvisation tasks. Therefore the students' improvements in rhythmic improvisation and melodic improvisation skills verified that students had more understanding of the musical foundation because they knew what to chose and how to use it in their creative works.

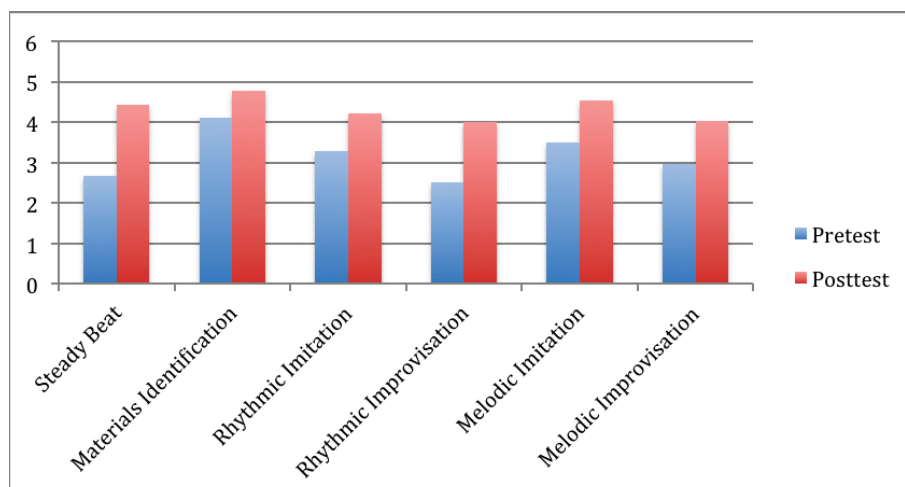


Figure 1 The Comparison of the 10 Students' Pre-test and Post-test Scores over 12 lessons; Categorized by Objectives

Conclusion

Teacher should concern about the learning potential of young students. Students should have chances to experience music with various skills include listening, singing, performing, moving, reading & writing, and creating. Beside teaching students to understand music, teacher should encourage students to use their creative thinking to create their own musical works. Student will have more musical understanding and it also develops their musicianship. Rhythmic improvisation and melodic improvisation are a simple thing that teacher can use to teach students. Changing one material can create new song. That is an idea that was used to develop this teaching module. Among six materials that were presented on this teaching module, long/short sound and sound/silent were the materials that students had got higher score than the others. That is because the students are familiar with those materials from their normal class.

On the contrary, with the materials that are more complex such as louder/softer or faster/slower, students had got a lower score. However, students showed improvement on the posttests that means this teaching module have efficiency.

Recommendations

It should have another action research which develop improvisation teaching module for higher grad students in a classroom setting. Beside learning music in private lesson, students should have chance to interact and experience with the others.

It should have a study that aim to develop musical foundation of parents. Because the parents have an influence on their children. If the parents have basic musical knowledge and have some experience with music. They will be a good partner for the teacher to develop the children's musical skills.

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