

When music speaks all languages: An inclusive music pedagogy for refugee and immigrant children

Gillian Howell

Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne, Australia
howellgm@yahoo.com.au

ABSTRACT

At a Melbourne English Language School, young immigrants and refugees from all over the world come together to learn English and prepare for mainstream school. They also take part in a creative music program in which each class composes and performs their own music, in the midst of a huge diversity of backgrounds in music experiences, schooling, and English ability. This paper describes the pedagogical approach developed by the musician resident at the school, and discusses ways of establishing strong musical understanding by non-verbal means.

Keywords

Child immigrants, ESL, music education, pedagogy, language

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of school-age children arrive every year in Australia as immigrants, and in their first twelve months must contend with a completely unfamiliar environment. Immigration means leaving a country filled with familiar and predictable elements, to come to a place where very little makes sense (Igoa, 1995) and where most things must be learned afresh (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). School culture is often very different in their countries of origin (Roessingh, 2006), with regard to expectations of teachers, students, instructional style, and the learning environment.

Refugees make up a significant proportion of the overall intake of newly-arrived children in Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2007). Many have a history of severely interrupted schooling, or little or no experience of school. Frequently they are not literate in their mother tongue, and numeracy skills may be similarly under-developed. They have often lived their young lives in highly dangerous, unstable environments, such as refugee camps, conflict zones, or a series of temporary homes. For such students, the process of adapting to school in Australia can be extremely challenging (Birman, 2005; Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Cassity & Gow, 2005; DEECD, 2008; Earnest, Housen, & Gillieat, 2007; Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture [VFST], 2004).

The DEECD in Victoria provides education support for all young immigrants through its New Arrivals Program, including dedicated English Language Schools where children can develop proficiency in English while working in a curriculum context. These schools are transitional, with students enrolling for between two and four terms before making the transition to mainstream school (DEECD, 2007). English Language Schools often represent an important oasis of stability for immigrant and refugee students - a place where they can build social connections, develop their English skills and participate in a community, and gradually learn about Australian culture and ways of life (VFST, 2004).

REVISING PEDAGOGY

I have been the resident music teacher in the primary section of one of these English Language Schools since 2005, teaching a program that focuses on composition and creative music-making. Classes are small (a maximum of 13 students per class) and lessons are long, with between 60 and 90 minutes per class each week. There is huge enthusiasm for the music program - many of the students have had little exposure to instruments and group music-making before, and music is often a highlight of the week.

I came to Melbourne English Language School [MELS – a pseudonym] as a music workshop artist, with a music pedagogy that emphasised hands-on learning and creative work. The creative process we use is informed by my professional background in group-devised composition, improvisation and collaborative work.

In 2007 I began Masters research into the way newly-arrived children perceive and make sense of music-learning. Through an initial pilot study in 2007 I identified three key stages of understanding and participation among the students in all their classes at MELS:

- Level 1 – where the child can see what to do (and participates through imitation and copying), but has no understanding of the intention of the tasks or the rules that guide their participation.
- Level 2 – where the child understands the intention and rules of the task, so can adjust their efforts accordingly.
- Level 3 – when the child understands the task to a level of confidence where they can lead and teach others

(thus modelling and demonstrating the work to the newest students at the Level 1 stage).

I also made an analysis of different learning activities taking place in the school, noting the characteristics of those that most engaged the students. The most engaging activities typically involved students working on their own projects, interacting only occasionally with the teacher when guidance or help was required. Very little talking would take place among students at these times.

A review of current research into the learning needs of the contemporary refugee cohort, with its history of severely disrupted schooling, and other destabilising factors, revealed other teaching approaches with which students engaged more readily. It highlighted the importance of repetition of tasks; structure and routine (so that students can relax into a sense of predictable events, and build confidence); consistency of language and approach; hands-on learning; and an emphasis on non-verbal means of delivering information and guiding students' participation (Birman, 2005; Brown et al., 2006; Earnest et al., 2007; Igoa, 1995; VFST, 2004).

Using video observation of my teaching, I realised that my workshop pedagogy did not conform to these characteristics on several levels. For example, I spoke a lot. I guided the students frequently with my voice. I certainly adjusted the words I used, and spoke slowly, but there was still a reliance on language, written or spoken. I also introduced new activities each week, expecting that this would be more engaging for the students.

Music and other creative expression activities can be a powerful way to assist immigrant and refugee children to construct meaning and identity and re-establish social connections (Rousseau, Drapeau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2005). These activities offer an alternative means of expression and a way of exploring their inner world, with the emphasis away from linguistic ability (Spina, 2006). Musical expression offers an additional emotional support to new arrivals, counteracting "the silent stage" that many young immigrants go through (Igoa, 1995, p. 38), and providing a way to connect with others, participate fully in activities and experience success (Spina, 2006).

I was strongly compelled to respond to this emerging knowledge, and a new pedagogical approach began to evolve. The focus is on minimal language and supportive scaffolds for the students that help them make sense of the musical environment, participate in everything regardless of their English language ability, and create and perform music that they will feel proud of, and towards which they will feel a strong sense of ownership.

"Good listening, good looking, good waiting..."

To start with, I made a conscious effort to pare back my teaching language to only the essentials. These included words like "stop", "pick up/put down", and "together"; however, my most important phrases were to do with

looking, listening and waiting. Most of the musical skills I wanted the students to develop were included in these three broad competencies. Students engage in "good listening" when they play in response to a musical cue, or in unison with someone else, when they sing with attention to intonation, or make adjustments in their playing in response to the musical texture, such as in dynamics or tempo. Students engage in "good looking" when they follow visual cues, or use eye contact to communicate intention or complicity, or to play in time with another person whose instrument is hard to hear in the overall texture. Students employ "good waiting" when they wait for the right time to enter the music, or allow the appropriate time for rests in their part.

The fact that these three words refer to what are essential skills in all areas of schooling is a further advantage – I know that this vocabulary will be reinforced elsewhere in school throughout the week, and that I am also reinforcing what other teachers are teaching. I don't need to establish the vocabulary myself. The meanings are clear to the children, and allow me to praise and acknowledge good work ("Great listening there Hassan!") as well as keep students focused on particular tasks with comments or questions ("For this we will need to be *looking* and *waiting!*" or "Was that good waiting/looking/listening?").

Environmental scaffolds

I established a number of what I call 'environmental scaffolds' that underpin all the different activities we do in class. These are non-verbal ways that I organise the space or the framing of the lesson. They help to create an implicit learning environment where concepts are learned and understood gradually, through the environment rather than through explanation.

Visual cues and markers help to organise the space and set up tasks, such as lines of tape on the floor to assist children to stand in lines or circles, or to gather in a certain part of the room. Information is written on the board in different colours so that I can direct their attention to "the blue writing" or "the red numbers". Visual cues sometimes include notation, as a way of representing musical ideas – both graphic notations and standard Western notation may be utilised, depending on the needs of the project. I even use Auslan [Australian Sign Language] hand signs on occasion, learned when I worked at a school for deaf children. The signs for "copy", "look at me/him/her", and "different" have proved to be clear and quick ways to impart information, with the meaning of the sign easily discernable to the child.

I place a lot of emphasis on the musical consistency of the environment, as I am dependent on this to establish many musical concepts and principles such as ensemble and simultaneity. It also encourages forward whatever musical knowledge, understanding and vocabulary is already present in the students. There is constant attention to achievable musical detail, such as starting or finishing

together, accurately playing a chosen number of repetitions, and making smooth transitions between musical sections. We count in according to the tempo of the music we are about to play, and all cues I give, once established, conform to the same physical gestures or focal point each time.

As described earlier, repetition of tasks is essential if students are to build confidence in what is required of them, and in their understanding and sense of achievement. I start each music lesson with a series of warm-up games that I devise to run in sequence for at least five weeks in a row. This enables all students to become familiar with the work and build confidence in how they can manipulate it or elaborate upon it.

Project-based approach

The project-based approach supports many of these scaffolds. The transitional nature of the school means that music work cannot be carried over from one term into the next. I therefore devise a 'project' for each class, choosing a starting point of relevance to the class (such as an integrated studies theme, or a class reader) upon which we will develop original musical ideas over the ten week term.

The longer timeframe allows space for ideas to be processed, and creative input to emerge. Each week we work on things that become part of a greater whole. Sometimes, isolated tasks do not always make sense; later, the context becomes clear, and at the end of the term, the children will know how each aspect of the composition came into being, what steps were undertaken, and how it grew. New techniques are learned in the context of the project.

Foundation activities and deep tasks

In every class, a wide range of both language abilities and music experiences is present, due to the transitional nature of the school. The three levels of understanding that I identified in my pilot study were key in demonstrating the need for everything I teach to be achievable through copying and imitation (with no further understanding necessary), with the scope to also be deep tasks that offer students challenges, autonomy, and significant opportunity for original musical input, according to ability and interest.

The warm-up games that start each class lay the foundations of musical knowledge, establishing concepts like pulse, rhythmic variation, maintaining tempi, taking turns, spontaneity and simultaneity. The body of the lesson is concerned with creative work, and these are deep tasks which allow students to assume greater control over the musical content – inventing parts, leading sections, building their musical independence – while still ensuring all can participate successfully simply by copying. Thus, in the class composition, the newest student might be playing their part as one of a small section, able to watch the other students and start and finish when they do. In the same piece, other students may be playing melodies they have invented themselves, or improvising a solo, or singing words they have written themselves.

Student ownership

In the music program at MELS, students choose notes, text, instruments, and sounds. They invent rhythmic, melodic and harmonic material, and write their own lyrics. Any prior knowledge is utilised as a priority (eg. drum rhythms or songs that they have learned from their communities), and built into the compositions. Music projects are drawn from classroom themes and topics, meaning that the students can come to music with some vocabulary. Students with more experience in the school (and thus more language) tend to assume greater input; newer students take on this role as they become more confident in English and in the music lesson process.

Many new arrivals spend their first few years in school in a new country feeling insecure about what they know and what they can contribute (Igoa, 1995; Rousseau et al., 2005). The focus of this music program on composing means there are infinite opportunities for student input, thus offering them a learning experience that validates and celebrates their contributions, and creates performance outcomes in which they have a huge stake.

CHALLENGES

It is important at this stage to acknowledge that some musical concepts are more challenging to instill than others without the aid of verbal or written explanations. Building accuracy in syncopated rhythms, for example, can be difficult. Like many young players, the students tend to speed up or slow down placement of certain notes to bring them closer to the dominant beats. I counter this by developing syncopated rhythms using numbers, counting out a cycle of 8 beats to represent the quavers/eighth notes in a bar of 4/4, and noting which numbers will not be heard on an instrument but must be heard in the head, for example.

It is always difficult to make small adjustments to the students' playing – if told that something is "just a bit too fast" the students tend to only hear the words "too fast" and so will play it dramatically slower. The effort required for them to make sense of instructions can create anxiety, which takes them out of their musical heads, and distances them from the information their aural skills can give them. Rather, I try to make small adjustments happen through implicit means – playing alongside the student in unison, for example, or by drawing their attention to how their part relates to others in the ensemble.

It can be a slow process, and it is just as important to ask oneself as the teacher how essential this adjustment is. Sometimes, going with what the student is doing naturally can mean an equally musical response, but one where the group momentum doesn't halt while individuals try to decipher exactly what their teacher wants them to do.

Melodic invention and improvisation can also take time to develop. The students make sense of much of the music activities by copying (each other, and the teacher), so establishing the notion that their own ideas are desired and

encouraged can be met with a lot of confusion. I discuss a number of strategies I have developed to counter this in the article *From Imitation to Invention: Issues and Strategies for the ESL music classroom* (Howell, 2009).

Lastly, assisting students to develop the inner hearing skills that enable them to 'drop' back into the musical texture after stopping unexpectedly, is complex. Again, the musically-consistent environment is essential here. Stopping the group if someone enters at the wrong point in the bar, and starting it again (as many times as necessary) with all parts in sync, can build awareness among students of how all the parts fit together. It is also possible to highlight the synchronous beats between different parts; however for many of my students this acute observation of what may be quite swift individual parts can be confusing in the midst of ensemble playing.

THEORETICAL PARALLELS

This pedagogy has evolved through my own observations, reflections and established practice; however, it shares some strong parallels with the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky, in particular the importance of scaffolding tasks, supporting zones of proximal development, and the role peer and social learning plays in the development of children's skills and understanding (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004; Moll, 1990). I also found it useful to refer to the theories behind the whole language approach to literacy, when considering the way a musically-rich environment could implicitly encourage and develop musical literacy in the children (Goodman & Goodman, 1990). Current thinking on the importance of multiliteracies in the classroom also resonated, given the different literacy modes that are engaged in the non-verbal ways of teaching and communicating between myself and the students (O'Toole, 2009).

CONCLUSION

In time, these students will learn to speak English with ease, and may go on to specialise in many diverse areas. Their time at Language School is short in comparison to the rest of their schooling lives. However, this first experience of school in Australia is an important foundational opportunity, where many positive patterns of learning and competence-building can be established. Music has a role to play in this, not only as a complex set of abstract understandings, but also as a powerful expressive tool, and a time in the week when students can relax and engage socially while creating something unique in which they feel a strong sense of pride. Understanding and connection leads to real harmony – both within the music and without it.

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