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FROM IMITATION TO INVENTION: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES FOR THE ESL MUSIC CLASSROOM

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Abstract

For child immigrants and refugees to Australia, school can present a minefield of challenges to navigate, from unfamiliar language to the rules and conventions of Australian school culture. Music offers such children a potent means of expression and connection with others, and is a way in which many experience their first feelings of success in school here. However, developing musical creativity in English as Second Language [ESL] settings poses challenges for music educators, in building student understanding of the intentions of the tasks. This paper discusses some of the arising issues and offers three strategies from the author's experiences as a music teacher in a Melbourne English Language School.

Key words: music improvisation, new arrivals, ESL, music education

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In Victoria, newly-arrived children from language backgrounds other than English can participate in an intensive English-language program for two to four terms, in one of nine dedicated English Language Schools and Centres across the metropolitan area, or through an Outpost program attached to a mainstream school (DEECD, 2007). These schools, centres and outposts make up the principal forms of delivery of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's [DEECD] New Arrivals Program, and English language instruction is delivered in context, through the key learning areas (DEECD, 2009).

The schools and centres are transitional, a place for young immigrants to adjust to their new environment and language before moving on to mainstream school. The research project discussed in this paper is based at one of these English Language Schools, given the pseudonym Melbourne English Language School [MELS] throughout the paper.

Students at English Language Schools in Victoria come from a wide variety of backgrounds, in terms of language, culture, and prior schooling experiences, and these differences directly influence the ease with which they adapt to their new surroundings. At one extreme are children arriving as refugee or humanitarian entrants, who frequently have a history of severely interrupted formal schooling, often with no literacy in their first language. What schooling they have had may have been undertaken in their second language. For these students, the "hidden curriculum" of Australian schools (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004, p. 489) needs to be learned (such as how to take turns, sit still for extended periods of time, concentrate, and the interactive nature of learning) as well as basic educational skills, including how to hold a pencil, use scissors, and look after equipment (Birman, 2005; Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Cassity & Gow, 2005; DEECD, 2008; Earnest, Housen, & Gillieat, 2007). The Language School intake also includes children arriving from China and other Asian countries, where they may have had age-consistent schooling, but in a dramatically different style to that used in Australian classrooms (Roessingh, 2006). These students must also make sense of the culture and behaviour expectations of school in Australia.

I have been working at MELS since 2005, employed by an external arts service provider as an ongoing artist-in-residence to design and deliver the music program. The weekly program is focused on creating original pieces of music using collaborative processes, and giving students hands-on music experiences in percussion, singing, and composition. Learning takes place in context, through term-long composition projects that need to be completed before the longest-enrolled cohort of students makes the transition to mainstream school at the end of each term.

Creative expression activities have, for some decades now, been considered an effective way of assisting migrant and refugee children to construct meaning and identity, to process traumatic experiences and re-establish social connections (Rousseau, Drapeau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2005). In particular, the non-verbal aspect of musical expression offers an additional emotional support to new arrivals. Igoa (1995) describes the "the silent stage" that new arrivals often go through, when their feelings of fear and inadequacy lead them to adopt a mechanism of silence. During this time, it is important to "help the child find ways to communicate – verbally, in writing, or through art" (p.38). Music offers such children a way to connect with others and participate fully in activities without a need for oral language skills.

For some of the student cohort at MELS, curriculum areas that emphasise verbal skills and literacy present significant challenges and potential barriers to learning (Bryce, Mendelovits, Beavis, & Adams, 2004). In contrast, music and other arts activities provide opportunities to learn and enjoying learning, "without experiencing the discouragement of having to display weak reading and writing skills" (p. xi). By developing their musical and artistic intelligences, students go on to build learning strengths that support their development in literacy and other areas. "The arts, by providing activities in which the minority child can find expression, fulfil expectations, exhibit competencies and demonstrate self-efficacy, enable the child to experience success" (Spina, 2006, p. 117).

The context

The research project at MELS that informs this paper was a qualitative case study focused on the way newly-arrived primary school children perceive music learning and music-making. Their descriptions of what they learn, and what sense they make of it, reveal valuable insights about effective pedagogy and strategies for developing the musical creativity of children with minimal understanding of English.

I began with a pilot study that sought to understand the learning process that new arrivals go through. It identified three 'levels of understanding' through which the children progress, as their English language skills improve. These see students move from participating simply by copying what they see other children doing (without understanding the intention or context of the task), to participating in tasks with an understanding of its intention and context, to developing their competence and awareness to the point where they take on roles as leaders in the class, guiding and demonstrating to their peers, and providing important modelling for newer students (Howell, 2007).

These 'levels of understanding' are always present concurrently in a transitional environment where new students arrive throughout the year, and transitions to mainstream school take place at the end of every term. This knowledge led me to make a detailed reconsideration of how and what I was teaching, which I described in an online reflective practice journal, Music Work. The issues and strategies that emerged through my research were first discussed on this forum.

This style of learning, that moves students from imitation towards greater levels of creative independence through a process of exploration and experience, mirrors many of the essential tenets and goals of Orff process. Key areas of focus in my practice at MELS - the importance of the sense of community in the class (and indeed, in the school), the importance of performance, and the development of positive self-image through participation in music - are also "basic to teaching with the Orff Approach" (Choksy, Abramson, Gillespie, & Woods, 1986, p. 139).

My pedagogical approach has evolved over many years of professional practice. I trained as a classical performer but moved towards improvisation, composition, collaboration and

workshop facilitation while studying in London, building a practice as a teaching artist in schools and communities. Thus, I am coming only recently to the rich insights of renowned pedagogues such as Orff, and joyfully discovering the many resonances and parallels.

Issues in building a creative music environment

In music, every activity will ideally encompass challenges and successes for students at each of these levels of understanding. Those with no English need to be able to participate successfully simply by observing what is going on, taking part, and copying either what they see their peers or the teacher doing. For students with more developed English language skills, they will be engaging directly with the purpose, intention and rules of the task, albeit via pared-back instructional language. The 'leaders' consolidate their skills and understanding, and develop important cognitive understanding in the process of guiding and demonstrating to newer peers, as identified in contemporary responses to Vygotsky's theories (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004).

However, there are issues that arise with both composing and improvisation activities in an ESL music classroom from the visual nature of learning via copying. How do you explain or demonstrate to students that don't understand English that you want them to invent their own music? There are not only language barriers. Many come from cultural and schooling backgrounds where all necessary information is 'transmitted' from teacher to student in a very formal, non-interactive way. Students in these environments are rarely encouraged to express their opinions or explore possibilities, and quickly learn that there are right and wrong answers for everything (Igoa, 1995; Roessingh, 2006). Students everywhere can be considered somewhat risk-averse (Galton, 2008), engaging in strategies to limit the ambiguity of tasks presented to them by teachers; however, prior experiences in schools where wrong answers can result in humiliation or lessening of status, and opinions can be construed as disrespect ((Igoa, 1995; Roessingh, 2006) will make many newly arrived students even more reluctant to take a risk in offering a personal response.

Furthermore, creating an environment of improvised music means asking them to resist the strategy of participating by copying that has been their strongest support in the school. Now, when the teacher or another student gives a demonstration, they are not to memorise what is being played, but to notice more abstract things such as when it starts and finishes, or its overall shape, or the range of notes being played (but not the order of the pitches) or the rhythmic shape and energy (although not the exact rhythm being employed). How can the teacher, or the overall class environment, create awareness of these elements without explanatory language?

Strategies

I have developed many strategies to encourage primary ESL students to invent and improvise their own music. I will describe three of these in this paper. They move from chance-related processes that do not require students to do more than complete one simple task at a time, to more detailed instructions that encourage students towards more abstract and considered decision-making.

(1) A Letter and a Number

Some students arrive at Language School with some knowledge of English alphabet letters. For those that don't, these are introduced early on in the general classroom, as names, sounds and shapes. Counting is also taught early on as, for many students, the concepts are already familiar, and simply the new labels need to be learned. The following composing task leads students to create melodic material in groups, building upon this knowledge.

1. Each student has a tuned percussion instrument, using only the diatonic notes. (If desired, instruments can be pre-set in a preferred 5-note mode).
2. Each student chooses one note (ideally they do this without conferring with each other – it doesn't matter if some choices are the same).
3. Each child then selects a number between 1 and 6 (again, without conferring).
4. The teacher sets up a pulse of six (or eight – or any preferred time signature), counting each number out loud. Each child places their chosen note on their chosen number.
5. Now each child chooses a second note, and a second number. Add this choice in so that now everyone is playing two notes, in two different places in the cycle of six.
6. Rehearse this awhile. Try bringing people in one by one, in layers; going around the circle and hearing each person's choices, allowing two repetitions per person; hearing different combinations of people playing (in 2s, 3s, 4s, etc).
7. Divide the class into groups of 2 or 3. The combination of numbers and letters in each group will start to spell out a melody. Everyone in the group now learns the whole melody and performs it in unison. (Where 2 notes occur on the same beat in a group, players can either choose to play just one of the two, or play them both together, using two sticks).

I go on to use this melodic material in different ways. I might find two or more of the melodies combine well, to create a melody and harmony or counter melody. Melodies can also be strung together consecutively to create a longer phrase. The texture that is created by everyone in the whole group playing *only* their initial choice of note and number is also an interesting piece of material to include in a larger compositional structure.

In a recent project at the English Language School, one of the students began to sing his group's melody, improvising words implied by the rhythm: *One day, I went to market, I bought some flowers, they're for my mother.* The words came spontaneously, but this idea of starting a song with the words 'One day…' became a 3-verse song about memories, providing students with an opportunity for creative expression that recalled events from their countries of origin (some happy, some funny, and some painful events).

One day, back in my country,
People were throwing stones, and I felt frightened.
That day, I was so very sad.
My family ran away, and found a new house.

The song was accompanied by another short melody that had also emerged from the invention task. It proved an effective way to build a student composition using somewhat random or chance processes, while at the same time developing the students' sense of pulse, rhythm and ensemble.

(2) Singing books ("How can we sing these words?")

I work closely with the class teachers to develop composition projects that link directly to classroom themes and vocabulary. A popular project is to develop musical responses to a class book or shared reader. We might build rhythmic chants from phrases in the text, develop rhythms from sentences and words that we go on to play on instruments, or create a song using the text. The following strategy was developed to develop sung melodies by modelling ideas for the students, to inspire their own, and ensure strong student input and control. It also proved a valuable technique for revealing the different musical personalities and cultures of the students.

1. Choose a page or section of the book that the class agrees would make a good song, and decide which words are to be used, in which order.

2. To get ideas flowing, the teacher selects the first short phrase from this selection and improvises a melody for it. The class echoes this back. Explore as many different musical ideas as possible using this call-and-response format. Keep the words the same the whole time.
3. At this point the teacher can also ask the students (or simply watch their reactions closely) to indicate the improvised lines they like best.
4. Now ask for volunteers to sing the same line, improvising their own melody. After each one, the teacher sings it back to them, checking that they have copied it accurately. The teacher transcribes each melodic line after it is sung, so that there is a record.
5. Continue with volunteers improvising vocal lines for the different phrases chosen from the book until there is at least one idea for each of the phrases or sentences. Now try out different combinations of phrases and melodies, working towards creating a chorus or verse. I found that with my students, quite a number of the melodic suggestions flowed together well. When we seemed stuck for material at a certain point in the text, I would sing what already had to them, and see if anyone could improvise a musical solution for the remaining text.

Most students in the class were happy to have a try and all participated in the echoing of the different musical ideas. We maintained a playful, positive, supportive atmosphere. I found that it was important for me to be ready to jump in with more improvisations any time there was a gap or extended hesitation (especially early on), as the students would lose confidence in any prolonged 'dead time', and their echoing of my ideas helped them consolidate their own.

Interestingly, clear stylistic differences between the various cultural groups emerged in their improvisations, with similarities between like cultural groups (such as the children from different African countries). It proved a valuable insight into the musical expressions they were used to, and in combining their different ideas into one song, I was able to utilise these distinctive musical inflections.

(3) Name-music

The third strategy I developed with the students was focused on creating short improvised solos that could be played by individuals over a harmonic bed of ostinati. As a way of identifying these solos as unique pieces of musical material, invented by each individual and potentially different every time, I referred to them as '*name*-music', so that my improvisations would be called "Gillian-music", Mohammad's would be "Mohammad-music", Jun-Wei's would be "Jun-Wei-music" and so on.

1. With each child playing tuned percussion (a range of glockenspiels and xylophones with removable bars), establish an ostinato-based accompaniment in D minor, in 4/4 metre.
2. Each child takes turns to play an improvised solo. The teacher cues them in. They start their improvisation on D. The teacher counts 10 beats out loud, starting on their first note. On beat number 10, they aim to finish their solo (it doesn't matter if they finish right on 10, or a couple of beats later), again on D (my students tended to make their starting and finishing Ds an octave apart).
3. Once these consecutive solos were established, and students were feeling more comfortable, we added a Chorus, an ostinato with a strong musical hook and rhythm that was played in between each solo by the whole group.

It is important to acknowledge that for some of the students, this task may have made very little sense, in terms of what they understood they were expected to do. My reflective journal comments that,

> They all struggled a bit with the idea of making up their own music. Some just waved their hands in the air, looking completely stumped. We don't have enough common language to be able to reassure them that it is okay just to try, to just playing something and see what they think of it. We (the class teacher and I) said all this, but I don't think it was really understood.
> Music Work online journal, (Howell, 2008, October 15, para. 7)

There was a lot of language for them to take in. Some understood, and managed. Others worked it out as we went around the circle, one child having a turn at a time. For those that didn't understand, they had the chance to observe a number of their peers complete the task, one by one as we went around the circle. The consistency of the counted numbers, the hand cues I gave on numbers one and ten, and the fact that the soloists stopped playing on or just after the number ten, seemed to give them enough information to undertake the task. The playing of the Chorus between each solo ensured that everyone remained engaged with the music, and was never waiting too long to play.

Later, I wondered,

> Do they know they are composing? Do they feel pleased with themselves when they improvise? Do they have any idea what I am asking them to do, and what 'success' in this task looks or sounds like? They can't copy their neighbour. Do they understand why not, when they would usually copy in music? It is quite a minefield of unknown things, laden with potential misunderstandings.
> Music Work online journal (Howell, 2008, November 2, para. 8)

Their class teacher offered her thoughts on this:

> Maybe they don't [understand what's going on] at the beginning, but I think it clicks that it is *their* music, because [of] the way it's changed. I think they must know, that we're actually composing this, because it is changing all the time until we get to the one that suits us. I think they know they've got the input.
> (Alice, class teacher, MELS, interview transcript)

Conclusions

For many newly-arrived students, coming from a diverse range of cultural and schooling backgrounds, and navigating a completely new environment, the concept of improvisation and invention in music lessons is often a new and challenging one. It may contradict their expectations of what should take place in school, and where musical content should be coming from. However, there are enormous benefits to the students in feeling a strong sense of ownership in the music the play. It validates and endorses their contributions, at a time when many often feel like they may never fit in or catch up with their peers. For those that struggle with literacy and other key learning areas, music is often an area where they shine, and experience success.

> They're *very proud* when they've done a concert, at their ability, and they're very proud of the fact that they're playing music that no-one ever has… that this has been put together… workshopping with you, and how it's all come together.
> (Alice, class teacher, MELS, interview transcript)

The fact that they are prepared to experiment with these strange and unfamiliar ideas demonstrates the trust that newly-arrived students place in their teachers, as well as into the music program. Perhaps it is also suggestive of their vulnerability, that at some point they will just do what they think they are being asked to do, without knowing if they have understood correctly or not, because that is what is expected of them at school (Howell, 2008, October 15). Such courage needs to be supported and scaffolded in ways that gently, steadily lead them to own their eventual successes in tangible ways, so that they will carry that sense of

pride with them through their next inevitable transition as they build their new lives in Australia.

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