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Pedagogical Challenges in Folk Music Teaching in Higher Education: A case study of Hua'er music in China

Abstract

Literature reviews suggest that traditional approaches in folk music education are not necessarily compatible with the conventions of formal music education. Whilst many recent studies have tended to define these non-classical-music learning contexts as 'informal', the practice of folk music appears to be much more complex and fluid in the real world. This case study presents an example of teaching and learning experiences of folk singers in contemporary society in Western China. In this particular context, 'informal learning' was found to be influenced by 'formal' music practices, whilst a 'formal approach' in a classroom had also been influenced by an 'informal oral tradition', as was recently proposed in Chinese Higher Music Education. Based on qualitative and quantitative analyses of teaching observation data from four music lessons, the research discusses a possible pedagogical model where two approaches of learning (conservatory model vs. traditional folk learning) could coalesce to ensure effective learning outcomes of traditional folk music in higher education contexts.

Keywords: singing pedagogy, folk song, higher education, Hua'er music

Introduction

Folk music education has emerged as a challenging issue when it was introduced into the school-based formal music education of China as a result of the 1989 curricula reform in Art Education (Ministry of Education PRC., 1989). More recently, with the release of the 2005 National Curriculum for College Music Education (Ministry of Education PRC., 2004), 'local' (was also labelled 'authentic') folk music performances are meant to be embraced as a college-based general learning content for all music students in HE. Whilst a formalised pedagogical system had been established previously for the practices of Western and Chinese Classical musics, this approach was reported to be less effective in the education of authentic folk songs (Yang, 2014). The reasons were believed to be: (1) oriental folk music has always been learnt by imitation (Cooke, as cited in (Green, 1990, p.133)); and (2) the oral-transmitted folksongs are living entities that always changes from time to time (Palmer & Leach, 1978, p.57). Although these conclusive findings were not drawn from Chinese folk music, the same issues were also discussed in a number of recent studies on Chinese music education (e.g., Zhu J., 2010; Zhao D. G., 2008). But, the questions to be addressed are: (1) would it be logical to exclude folk music in the formal music education system of higher education because of its 'incompatibility' with the current teaching system? (2) Should the college-based music education remain invariable to ensure a 'musical excellence'? A short answer to either question seems to be 'No'. As it has been suggested by research into folk music education in Finish Higher Education institutions (e.g., Sibelius Academy), folk traditions are not inherently incompatible with formal education in the practice of reviving folk musics (Ramnarine, 2003, pp.xii, 65), as well as in an evolving recreation of them (Edgar, 2004, p.223). In addition, the introduction of folk music study into Higher education was reported to be an effective channel to address cultural inclusivity in the society, as exampled in Australia (Southcott & Joseph, 2010).

In the Chinese context, political, musical and cultural forces have jointly influenced the reform (or reshaping) of contemporary music education. As the current Chinese music education is primarily based on a state-run system of three levels: primary (6-11 years), secondary (12-17 years) and higher education (18 years onwards), the 2005 National Music Curriculum for Undergraduate Education, has had direct influences on the vast majority of music colleges and music conservatoires[1]. In this curriculum, 180 hours (10 credits) were allocated exclusively for college-based 'local' teaching contents, such as indigenous Chinese musics. Therefore, it can be inferred that the inclusion of folk music in higher education would have a significant impact on the learning of approximately one hundred thousand music graduates each year[2] and inevitably present a challenge to the existing conservatoire approaches to learning music. Thus, folk song pedagogies emerged as a key issue in cultural and educational transformation (Zhang 2010; Tillmann and Salas 2006).

This article seeks to engage with this challenge by drawing upon a set of experimental music-teaching lessons that were designed to explore possible pedagogical strategies that can ensure effective learning outcomes of folk song singing in the HE context. The chosen music for this study was Hua'er, a folk song tradition that is shared by people of over nine ethnic groups across north central and northwest China. Hua'er songs are normally drawn from an extensive traditional repertoire and are performed unaccompanied using lyrics that are improvised in line with certain verse structures. In tradition, rural people perform these songs widely during daily work or at special communal occasions, such as singing festivals, to share their praise for young love, as well as the weariness of farming life and the joy of singing. In former times, Hua'er song singers were mostly self-taught and/or learned orally. Ever since the 1990s folk music revival in China, Hua'er has become a) an active musical

[1] According to 2007 National Statistics for Education, 87% of colleges in China are state-funded.

[2] Data were drawn from the Chinese Society of Music Education (CSME) 2010 annual report.

vehicle in cultural exchange across ethnicities and popular rural entertainment for young generations (Dong, 2009); and b) a valuable teaching resource in formal music education. In 2009, Hua'er was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO and, as a result, was given particular attention in the college-based music curriculum.

Data Collection

Four music lessons were recorded individually at a music college studio in Western China, which comprised both a conservatory pedagogical approach (termed here as 'formal') and a folk learning approach (termed 'informal'). Personal contact was made with the research participants in advance of their invited participation, to explain the proposed recording plan and ensure that ethical consent was agreed. The three participants were:

- Folk singer (F): A 35 year-old male singer who was reported to be a very promising folk singer of the new generation and is famous for his authentic singing style of Hua'er music;
- Student (S): A Year-3 college student in music who was initially enrolled as the only local student with a specialty in folk song singing. He had some informal learning experience of Hua'er songs previously, but did not have much direct contact with field folk singers (such as F).
- Tutor (T): A professional music tutor who had been teaching vocal music for over forty years. He was trained as a Western classical tenor at music conservatory. Since then, he started teaching singing in Western classical and Chinese classical styles. He had much experience of listening to Hua'er music and had already been in research contact with F, the folk singer, for two years.

The three participants formed two teaching-learning dyads, namely F-S and T-S. Each dyad had the same student but a different teacher, who were given two Hua'er songs to work with for each lesson (see **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**). In addition to the classroom

observation, short interviews were also conducted with each participant individually afterward to acquire participants' feedback and evaluation on their performances.

Table 1: Data collection plan

Folk learning approach Teacher: F Student: S	Lesson 1	Teaching (Song A)
		Interviews 1&2 (20 minutes for each participant)
	Lesson 2	Teaching (Song B)
		Interviews 3&4
Conservatory approach Teacher: T Student: S	Lesson 3	Teaching (Song A)
		Interviews 5&6
	Lesson 4	Teaching (Song B)
		Interviews 7&8

The resultant four 55-minute lessons were video-recorded using two camcorders that were positioned at corners of the studio (see c1 and c2 in Figure 1). The first author sat behind a mirror in Lesson 1 to monitor the video data capture and to ensure that the video camera locations were appropriate. Similar arrangements were not needed for subsequent Lessons.

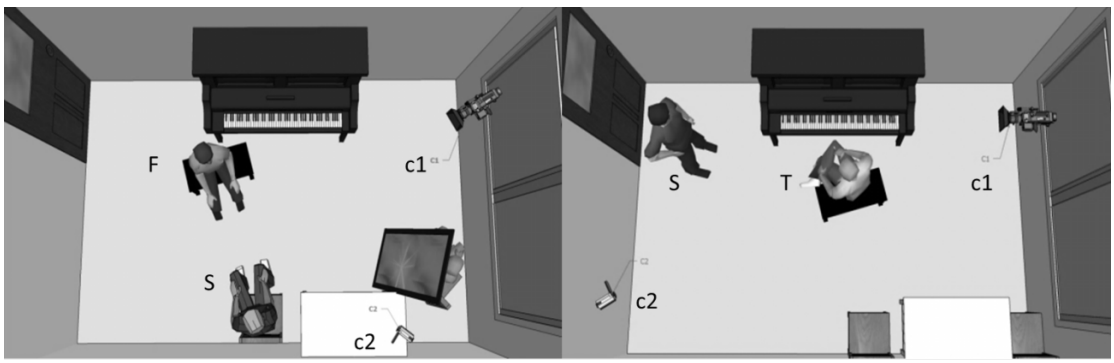

Figure 1: Recording settings of F-S and T-S studio lessons

Data Analyses

The data analysis in this study embraced a) quantitative analysis of video-recorded teaching-learning behaviour; and b) qualitative self-report and other-report data from the three participants about their performances during the four recorded lessons. By collating the quantitative video analysis outcomes with the interview data, the underlying reasons that possibly contribute to the teaching style of each teacher are discussed alongside the self-perceived learning strategies of the student in the final research findings.

Analyses of teaching-learning behaviour

The research data from the video capture were subject to categorisation using NVivo 8 (QSR, 2008). First, every lesson were coded by eight types of classroom behaviours (see exampled in Figure 3, 4, 5 and 6) using a similar quantitative analysing method to Ward's study (2004)[3]. The observation of these lesson sought to: (1) identify the classroom behaviour patterns of the participants; and (2) investigate differences and/or similarities amongst the dyads (i.e., F-S and T-S) on the basis of the observed behaviour patterns. Eight classroom 'activities' were identified in the behaviour analyses of video data from the four lessons. These are: Concurrent singing, Demonstration, Discussion (**S**tudent), Discussion (**T**eacher), Feedback, Instrumental playing, Solo practice and Verbal instruction. Behaviours that have no clear educational intention, such as leisure chat and mobile-phone playing, are treated as 'idle time' and, as a result, have not been included in analysis.

[3] In Ward's study on music performance teaching, each lesson was divided into continuous sections of 10 seconds' duration. Each section was then categorized in the type of events that occurred (teacher talk, student play etc.).

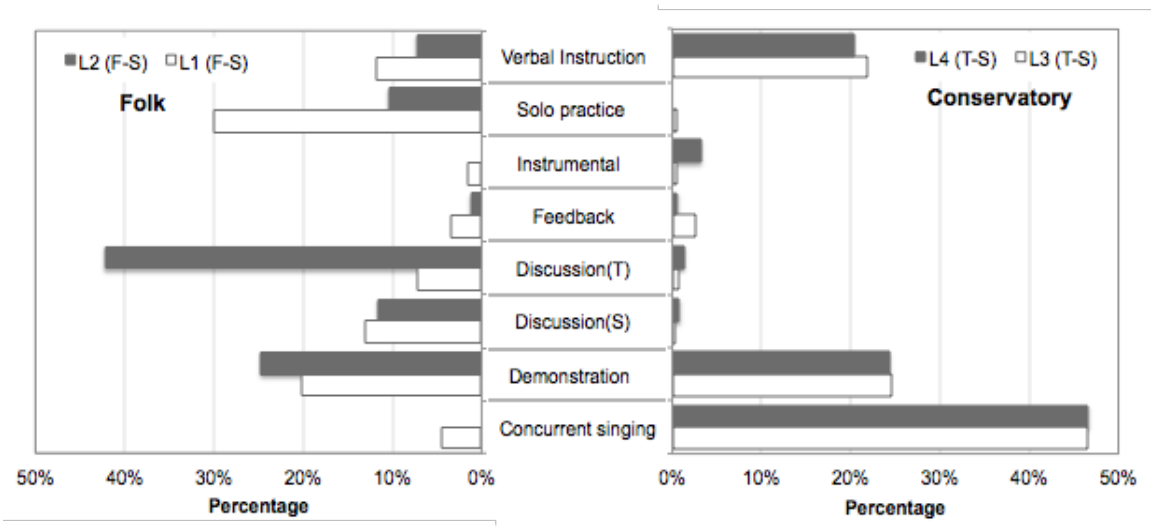

Figure 2: Overall time-spending of classroom activities across four lessons in percentage

Figure 2 shows the total percentages of time of the eight types of behaviour across four videoed lessons (55 minutes on average). In general, 'Demonstration' and 'Verbal instruction' are two common activities shared by all lessons, whilst F (the folk singer) tended to give less Verbal instruction than T (the college teacher) during the teaching process. Differences were seen between groups. Whilst F-S dyad (Folk) shows varied emphasis on a number of activities, Demonstration, Verbal Instruction and Concurrent Singing were the three dominant activity in T-S dyad (Conservatory). In T-S dyad (L3 and L4), T had over 45% of the lesson singing with the student together, which is significantly different from F-S dyad (less than 5% in L1 and L2). In the case of F-S dyad, S had more time for solo singing, which were 30% in L1 and 10% in L2. S had significantly more time in conversations at lessons with F, L2 in particular (over 40%). Also, F was more involved in tutor-initiated classroom discussions (Discussion(T)), whilst T spent very little time on this activity. This suggests that F-S dyad tended to be more interactive, whist T-S dyad seems to be more 'didactic'. However, it does not necessarily mean that the later was not 'communicative'; the difference of the approaches for interaction should also take into account (as was later

reported in after-lesson interviews). Whist the composition patterns are very similar in a 'Conservatory' context (L3 and L4), the 'Folk' examples (L1 and L2) showed a more variant activity composition in terms of overall ratios. Demonstration, Discussion(S), Discussion(T), Solo practice and Verbal Instruction seems to be the five most preferential activities in the F-S dyad (Folk). Amongst these, the ratios of Demonstration, Discussion (S) and Verbal instruction were similar, whilst Discussion(T) took over 42% of the overall lesson time in L1 and Solo Practice occupied 30% of L2.

In order to demonstrate the structural composition of the eight observed activities in a time sequence, each videoed lesson was initially divided into consecutive sections of 120 seconds, in which durations of activities were calculated individually within each section. These outputs were processed through MS Excel and then plotted against the overall lesson time (the horizontal axis in Figure 3 and Figure 4). By linking up data points within a particular activity, the eight activities were presented collectively as stacked diagrams, which indicate the changes of behaviour patterns of these activities across a lesson. But, different from Ward's mapping strategy, any activity that went beyond the give time unit of 120 seconds, namely 'cross-unit activity', was presented by one (rather than multiple) data point. Whilst this method generated overflows (see Figure 3, Sec. 31) and shortfalls (see Figure 3, Sec. 42) on the stacked duration contour within some units, it is advantageous in tracking longitudinal behaviour transformation across the lesson. The analyses of each lesson are detailed as below (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

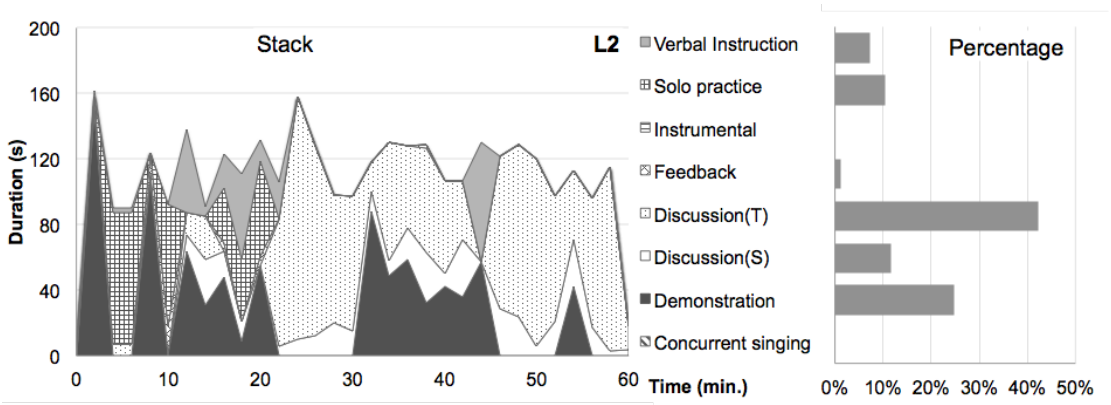

Figure 3: L1 accumulative activity time stack and percentages

In L1, 'Demonstration' and 'Solo practice' were major teaching activities, whilst 'Discussion (S)' and 'Verbal Instruction' are secondary. A few 'Discussion (T)' occurred primarily at mid-lesson, along with a little 'Solo practice' singing from the student at the end. As was suggested by the intermittent horizontally sections, the continuity of all activities appeared to be poor. It was inferred that the overall organisation of pedagogical strategies may not be very systematic in this particular case in terms of teaching fluency.

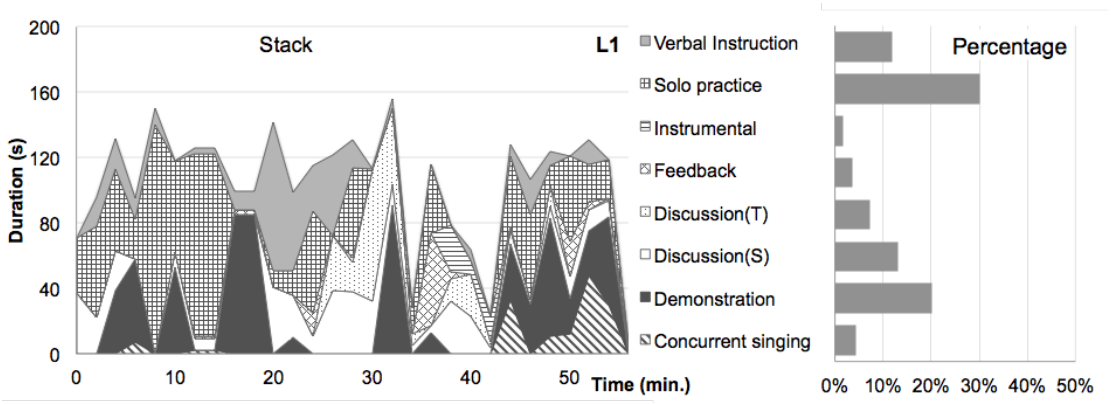

Figure 4: L2 accumulative activity time stack and percentages[4]

In L2, 'Discussion (T)' was the dominant activity and occurred mostly after minute 20, and 'Demonstration' listed the second important activity. Discussion(S) continued across most

[4] F used his mobile phone to play music as instrumental accompaniment, rather than piano.

part of L2, whilst 'Solo practice' shared a significant part in the first 20 minutes, but diminished afterwards. The progress of classroom activities was steadier than L1 in general, showing less fluctuation around 120s (the total amount of one unit). But, as was illustrated by the discontinued sections, activities were found distributed unbalanced across time. In other words, the teaching flow was not 'fluent' in the sense that pedagogical strategies were not applied coherently.

In F-S dyad (L1 and L2), the five major classroom activities all together occupied 80% of the lessons. These were: 'Demonstration', 'Discussion (by student S)', 'Discussion (by teacher T)', 'Verbal instruction' and 'Solo practice'. In-group variations were seen amongst major activities. Compared with L1, 'Discussion (T)' increased by 35% in L2, whereas 'Solo practice' decreased by 20%. There were also minor differences amongst other activities, such as 'Concurrent singing', which occurred occasionally in L1 but were not evident in L2. In terms of teaching-learning patterns, most activities in L1 appeared across the entire lesson, whilst L2 showed a clear division in all activities (except for 'Demonstration') around minute 20. In addition, there were a number of 'cross-unit' activities in the second half of L1, which suggests a less constant usage of multiple teaching and/or learning methods. Because the overall patterns of classroom activities appeared to be neither highly consistent nor systematically structured, it was inferred that the pedagogical strategies applied in F-S dyad are not well-defined. In normal cases, this implies F and S are less experienced in studio-based folksong learning.

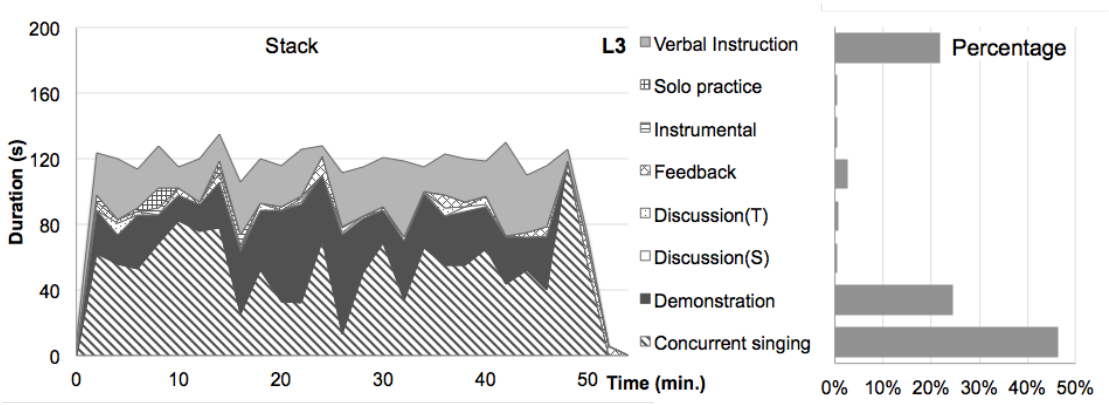

Figure 5: L3 accumulative activity time stack and percentages

In L3, 'Concurrent singing', 'Demonstration' and 'Verbal instruction' are the three dominating activities that overtook 90% of the lesson and distributed steadily across time. Amongst these, 'Concurrent singing' occupied 45%, whilst the other two equally share the remaining 45%. As the proportions of student-initiated activities ('Discussion (S)' and 'Solo practice') are extremely low, it was suggested that T tended to lead the lesson by giving continuous demonstration and verbal/non-Verbal instruction to S (42 short 'Feedback' were delivered by T during L3). The stable horizontal contours of the overall accumulation value around 120s suggests that the teaching pattern of T was highly consistent and well-paced within the lesson. It also implies T was able to utilise multiple classroom activities for folk music teaching and had strong preference of specific pedagogical strategies.

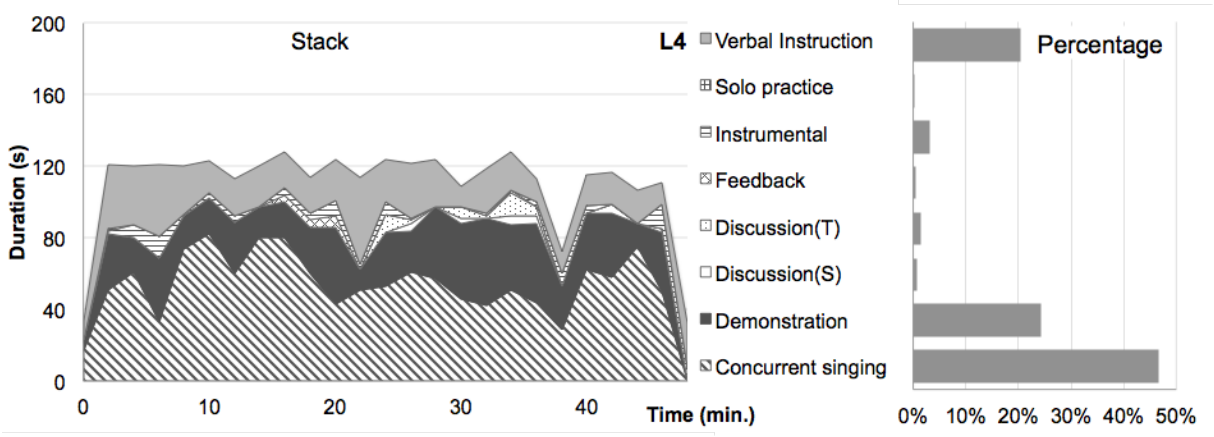

Figure 6: L4 accumulative activity time stack and percentages

L4 had a very similar behavioural pattern as in L3. Whilst 'Concurrent singing' and 'Verbal instruction' slightly decreased through the lesson, 'Demonstration' increased. Noticeably, there had been not time for student's 'Solo practice'.

The analyses of L3 and L4 suggested that T had a clearly-defined teaching pedagogy, which consisted of 'Concurrent singing', 'Demonstration' and 'Verbal instruction' as major teaching methods. This pedagogy is very consistent regardless of different teaching materials (two folksongs) in the sense that the time variations of all eight activities are less than 1% between L3 and L4. The three major activities overtook 90% of the lesson, whilst the other five activities were marginal. T also had a precise sense of time management and was able to integrate teaching activities in a coherent manner. As his teaching was characterised by high rate of 'Concurrent singing' and constant 'Feedback', S had little opportunity for 'Solo practice' and direct verbal communication with him. In general, T-S dyad appeared to have a highly consistent teaching/learning strategy that may reflect the stability of a formalised conservatory model.

The eight classroom activities can be further categorised into three sets of data: a. Joined activity (Concurrent singing and Instrumental); b. Teacher's activity (Demonstration, Discussion (T), Feedback and Verbal instruction); c. Student's activity (Discussion (S) and Solo practice). This provides a better presentation of behavioural pattern of classroom dynamics between the tutors and the student (see Figure 7).

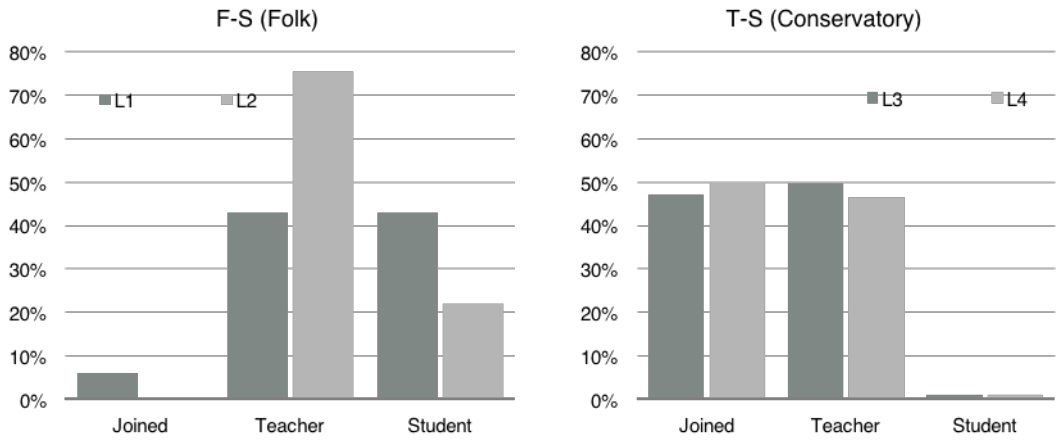

Figure 7: Comparison of three classroom active categories in Folk and Conservatory teaching contexts

It was seen that the Teacher and Student categories were dominant, whilst Joined activities were marginal in the Folk context. This indicated that the two participant (F and S) tend to 'work in turns' separately in the two lessons. In contrast, Joined activities and Teacher's activities were dominant and equally important in the Conservatory context, whilst there had been almost no time for student initiatives. L1, L3 and L4 are similar in the overall percentage of Teacher's activities (about 45%). Interestingly, if we compensate the reduction of Student's activities in L2 in relation to L1 with the increase of Teacher's activities in L2 (in relation to L1 again), the F-S dyad would show even proportions at Teacher's and Student's activities. The proportion of and the balancing amongst the three categories implies the dynamics that collectively shape the pedagogies of the observed folksong teaching/learning. The Folk context seems to favour both the leading role of the teacher and student's active participation, whilst the student tends to be a 'silent hard worker' in the Conservatory context. But, the teachers showed strong mastery of lesson time in both contexts. Therefore, each dyad appeared to have a specific behavioural model, namely teaching/learning style, whilst the T-S model was more stable in comparison to the F-S examples.

Additional analyses of interview transcriptions

In order to acquire 'subjective' account of upon the observational analyses above, eight interviews were conducted with F, S and T individually after lessons. A list of questions were provided for discussions, which covered five main topics from previous music experience of the participants to teaching/learning feedback on the four lessons.

Table 2: Interview questions in five topics

Topic 1: Previous experience with Hua'er (teaching/learning)
• How long have you been teaching/learning/practicing Hua'er singing? What did you teach/learn/practice? • What is your experience with the culture of Hua'er music?
Topic 2: Understanding of songs being taught/ learned during classroom lessons
• What is your understanding of the song(s) being taught in terms of lyrics, vocal skills and/or music in general?
Topic 3: Self-reporting/evaluating teaching/learning experience during each lesson
• What teaching/learning objects are to be achieved? • What is your understanding of the teaching/learning process? • Perception of the 'developing' objectives (objectives formulated though teaching/learning)?
Topic 4: Feedback on the performance of the other classroom participant
• What is the focus for musical/social knowledge? • What is the focus for skill/attitude? • What is the focus for teaching/learning experiences in comparison with previous teacher/student?
Topic 5: General evaluation on the outcomes of each lesson
• What object(s) have achieved? • What are the indications for vocal music training (formal/informal)? • What are the indications in higher music education?

Error! Hyperlink reference not valid. shows the percentages[5] of twenty-five coding categories that emerged from the eight transcribed interviews, which were perceived as three interrelated aspects in singing education ('Ethnomusicology', 'Pedagogy' and 'Performance'). As was indicated by the overall dominance over the other two, pedagogical

[5] Percentage was calculated by direct-translated words of a coding category in relations to the total word count.

issues were discussed the most across the eight interviews. In 'Ethnomusicology' group, the three interviewed participants tended to give information about their previous learning and teaching experience, along with the social context where the music practices occurred. Percentages in 'Pedagogy' group were mostly higher than those in the other two groups. 'Participant feedback' and 'Strategy' are overall emphasised across all interviews, whilst 'Activity evaluation' and 'Self-evaluation' were discussed more in some cases. 'Performance' group has the largest number (11 items) of coding categories, where 'Vocal feature' and 'Lyrics' were the two issues of a greater importance.

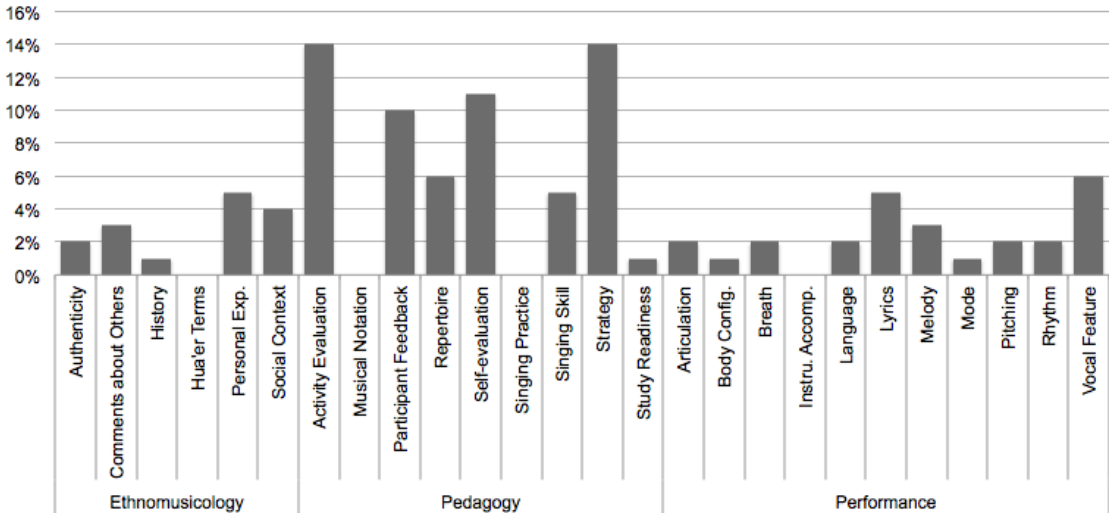

Figure 5: Text coding categories of interview data in percentage

More important than the descriptive data above, the content analyses of coded interviews were able to provided structured information that either underpinned or was discrepant to the behaviour observations. In this case, the participants an opportunity to offer direct verbal explanations on their classroom behaviour, which might be interpreted in a different way by the observer. These, in turn, supplied the behaviour analyses with live examples that illustrated how different types of classroom activity were integrated into the procedure of teaching and learning in both contexts.

Overall findings

The joined analytic outcomes of the two types of research data suggests that:

a. Although S appeared to be a 'learner' in both cases, it did not prevent him from participating learning by raising questions actively (as was evidence in F-S dyad). Interview data suggested that S was able to adjust his learning strategy and switch between the two approaches, as well as evaluate different instructions from F and T independently.

b. Both T (college teacher) and F (folk singer) reported preparation work before lessons, which set up teaching guidelines for their classroom activities, along with teaching objectives to be achieved. These objectives varied between T and F, who clearly focused on different aspects of the student's musical development.

c. Whilst the teaching content (two folk songs) was assigned in advance, both F and T introduced additional music material into lessons. In L2, F moved further to additional folk song repertoire alongside intensive discussions on the other folk musics that related to Hua'er songs.

d. A number of pedagogical strategies were shared in the Folk and Conservatory contexts. Amongst these, 'Singing demonstration' was one of methods that were used the most by both dyads. Also, instant verbal or non-verbal feedback was seen to be given by F and T on regular basis to support student's practice.

e. Both contexts were reported to be pedagogically challenging but productive. T affirmed that his initial teaching objectives had been achieved in the two consecutive lessons. F was also very positive about the student's performance. S was satisfied with his learning experience and outcomes, which also seemed to give him the confidence for self-practice in the future. These suggested that the Folk context was even more encouraging for S in the sense of active participation.

f. In general, observational findings were coherent with the after-lesson feedback from the participants. This suggests F and T were aware of their teaching process and pedagogical arrangement. Self-reports from them also confirmed that the lesson activities were developed consistently with certain types of teaching strategies, which were often adjusted for the needs of S.

Summary

Hua'er music has not been introduced into formal practice in higher institutions until 2006 (according to T in his interview), there has been no research so far dedicated to either of the two approaches from a pedagogical perspective (according to the search results of CNKI[6]). This research study compared two different approaches of folksong learning provided examples of pedagogies that were used in the observed Folk and Conservatory context. The research findings revealed a set of musical components and pedagogical strategies that were utilised by two instructors for Hua'er song teaching in Conservatory and Folk contexts. Differences between the two approaches also reflected the structural and conceptual diversity within the music education system, which is challenging a 'mono-cultural' ideology in current college-based formal music practice. Whilst the Folk approach seemed to be less consistent in term of pedagogical structure, the Conservatory approach appeared to be much more systematic. However, the systematicness of teaching pedagogy was reported to have no direct effect on the learning experience and sense of accomplishment of the student. Rather, the effectiveness of student's learning was primarily associated with the 'authenticity' and coherence of learning materials (course content). On the other hand, clearly-constructed pedagogical strategies (course structure), as seen in the Conservatory context, provided better clues for learning recall and evaluation. Therefore, it was proposed that the two approaches can be utilised together to increase the effectiveness of folk music education, in which innovative teaching contents and performances were supported by systematic pedagogies. Also, a sensible coordination of folk song materials and formal education practice was believed to be the key for an effective learning that motivates all music participants. Future research may further inquire the interrelationships amongst these

[6] CNKI: China National Knowledge Infrastructure national is a key e-publishing project of China started in 1996. Approved by the Press and Publications Administration of PRC and backed by Tsinghua University, CNKI project started with an e-journal product and later further expand the product line to cover newspapers, dissertations, proceedings, yearbooks and reference works and etc.

identified pedagogies to elaborate the intrinsic logic of the proposed teaching/learning model.

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