

The Application of Action Research in Elementary School Choral Instruction

-- Taking "A Joyful Dream" as an example

Hong Yu

Music (Music Education), College of Arts, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang 321004, China

Abstract: In elementary school music education, choral instruction serves as a major learning task and carries an important mission. It is not only a key pathway for cultivating students' musical literacy and teamwork skills but also an essential component for developing their thinking and expressive abilities. However, in actual teaching practice, because choral singing presents a certain degree of difficulty for students, educators often face challenges such as difficulty in maintaining pitch accuracy, difficulties in part coordination, and low student engagement. Therefore, this paper takes "A Joyful Dream"-a choral piece from the first semester of the fourth-grade music textbook (Renyin Edition) for elementary school-as a case study to explore the specific application of the action research method in classroom instruction. The action research method follows a clear basic cycle of "planning, action, observation, and reflection." This paper will adhere to this model to conduct teaching practices and make improvements addressing practical issues such as part coordination and pitch accuracy that arise during the instruction of "A Joyful Dream." Furthermore, this study will incorporate the cutting-edge educational concept of embodied cognition to explore effective teaching methods for choral instruction that align with the cognitive characteristics of elementary school students.

Keywords: Action Research, Elementary School Choral Instruction, Embodied Cognition, "A Joyful Dream".

1. Analysis of the Suitability of Action Research for Elementary School Choral Instruction

1.1. Overview of Action Research

Action research is suitable for small- to medium-scale studies. It is a problem-solving approach that focuses on addressing practical issues through the collaborative participation of teachers and students in the classroom. [1] Its purpose is not to establish theories or derive general principles, but rather to address problems encountered in educational activities and practices through continuous exploration and improvement within the action research process, thereby resolving practical issues in education.

Action research is a spiral-shaped, progressively deepening developmental process comprising four interconnected and interdependent basic stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. During the planning stage, teachers must anticipate potential issues that may arise in the classroom and then design targeted solutions based on those issues; in layman's terms, this stage closely resembles lesson preparation. The action and observation stages are critical to the success or failure of the entire research effort. These two stages are characterized by simultaneous implementation, evaluation, and revision. Teachers apply their pre-designed plans to real-world teaching scenarios, identify and document problems as they arise during instruction, and continuously assess whether the plan effectively addresses practical issues—all in preparation for subsequent revisions. The reflection stage involves summarizing the outcomes of classroom instruction, analyzing and adjusting strategies based on problems encountered in the previous lesson, and striving to correct these issues and improve performance in the next class. Truly high-quality teaching is refined through

this iterative process.[2]

"Research for action, research in action, and research by practitioners" are the fundamental characteristics of action research. [3] This research method emphasizes the close integration of theory and practice, focuses on continuous optimization and improvement through practice, and is highly practical, dynamic, collaborative, and participatory.

Unlike purely theoretical academic research, action research is rooted in the front-line classroom. It does not require complex equipment and can be independently conducted by ordinary music teachers; its findings directly serve classroom instruction, offering the advantages of low barriers to entry and high practicality. For elementary school music classrooms with limited class time and students of varying musical proficiency levels, the action research method enables "one lesson, one reflection; one lesson, one optimization," continuously narrowing the gap between instructional expectations and students' actual learning situations, thereby aligning with the routine teaching needs of elementary school music education.[4]

1.2. Characteristics and Challenges of Elementary School Choral Instruction

As one of the learning activities in school music classes, elementary school choral instruction has its own unique characteristics. It is not a solo performance by an individual student but rather the layering and blending of multiple voices, requiring the joint participation and coordination of a group of students to achieve. [5] Each student must not only sing the notes and rhythms of their own part accurately but also, building on that foundation, coordinate with students in other parts. While projecting their own voice, they must integrate it with the voices of others to create a harmonious and unified sound, thereby enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the performance.

While the collective nature and vocal diversity of choral music are distinctive features of choral instruction, they also present numerous challenges in the teaching process. On the one hand, differences in students' musical experience result in weak foundational skills, making them prone to issues such as intonation errors and rhythmic misalignment. For example, when teaching "A Joyful Dream," the difference between the low and high parts is a third, and the presence of altered notes in between often causes the children in the low part to be carried away by the high part during performance. On the other hand, some students lack enthusiasm; fearing they will sing poorly and hold the class back, they simply choose not to sing. The less they sing, the less confident they become, and gradually they lose interest and motivation in choral singing. In addition, emotional expression poses a challenge for elementary school students. While most children can sing the melody and rhythm accurately during practice, they struggle to truly understand the emotions conveyed in the song. Their performances lack emotional impact and fail to capture the serene, dreamlike atmosphere inherent in "A Joyful Dream." [6]

Beyond these three core issues, current elementary school choir classes also commonly suffer from a lack of differentiated instruction and overly simplistic evaluation methods. There are significant individual differences in vocal ability among fourth-grade students. Some students have good pitch and rhythm and can quickly master two-part harmonies, while a few struggle with the five basic notes and are reluctant to sing. Uniform training leads to a polarized situation where proficient students find the exercises too simple and boring, while those with weaker skills cannot keep up. At the same time, most classes rely solely on the teacher's verbal feedback and lack formative, encouraging evaluations, making it difficult to sustain the motivation of introverted students to participate in choir.

1.3. The Suitability of Action Research for Elementary School Choral Instruction

The characteristics of action research align closely with the needs of elementary school choral instruction. First, the core focus of action research is "problem-solving," which precisely addresses the challenges encountered in elementary school choral instruction. [7] For practical issues in choral instruction-such as part coordination and intonation training-teachers can gradually explore effective solutions through repeated cycles of planning and adjustment, thereby avoiding the disconnect between theoretical research and teaching practice.

Second, the dynamic, cyclical nature of action research aligns with the progressive teaching principles of elementary school choral instruction. Developing choral skills and enhancing collaborative abilities is a gradual process that cannot be accomplished in a single lesson. Action research allows teachers to adjust their strategies on the fly during class based on students' challenges. For example, when teaching "A Joyful Dream," if a teacher notices that students consistently struggle with a particular type of rhythm, they can design specific training activities for subsequent lessons to ensure that instructional objectives are achieved step by step.

Finally, the action research approach emphasizes the teacher's dual role as both "researcher" and "practitioner," which helps enhance the scientific rigor and effectiveness of teaching practices. Elementary music teachers, who teach the

same students every day, have the clearest understanding of the children's actual circumstances and the challenges encountered in the classroom. By participating in action research, teachers can transform their classroom experiences into concrete reflections, optimize teaching methods through continuous reflection and improvement, and elevate the quality of choral instruction.

2. The Practical Application of Action Research in Teaching "A Joyful Dream"

In teaching "A Joyful Dream," classroom observations clearly revealed three major issues: pitch accuracy, rhythm, and vocal part coordination. Regarding pitch accuracy, the main challenge was that some sections of the song featured large interval leaps-such as fourths and octaves-where the low notes failed to reach the required depth and the high notes were unstable, causing students' pitch to drift whenever they sang these passages. Regarding rhythm, since this song is in 6/8 time-a time signature fourth-grade students had never encountered before-the rhythmic pattern of "strong-weak-weak-secondary-strong-weak-weak" was difficult for them to master precisely in a single class, causing their singing to sound uneven. These issues with pitch and rhythm directly led to confusion in vocal part coordination. Students in the upper voices, due to unstable pitch, tend to sing too high or produce off-key notes during the chorus, which disrupts the development of the main melody. The lower voices, not being the main melody to begin with, are easily led astray by the upper voices; as a result, their already inaccurate melody is pulled even further off-key by the upper voices, causing them to become increasingly hesitant to sing out. Combined with the irregular rhythm, the entire chorus eventually descends into chaos. [8]

Following the cyclical model of action research, teachers should design lesson plans before class by considering the interrelationships among the three key issues. To address pitch accuracy, teachers can accompany students on the piano as they sing or create simple movements to help them transform abstract pitch into something tangible. For rhythm, teachers can have students sway to the music, using body movements to perceive the strong and weak beats. Additionally, to address issues with vocal part coordination, teachers can use the Colvin hand signals from the Kodály method for training, having students watch the teacher's hand signals while singing. [9]

After finalizing the plan, the teacher begins instruction according to the plan, paying close attention to the students' reactions as they teach. When correcting pitch, when singing the low "5," have the students stand softly on their tiptoes to feel the downward pressure of their toes; when the next phrase moves to the "5" an octave higher, have them place their hands above their heads to form a pointed shape, requiring them to reach upward to hit the note. In sections of the melody with minimal variation, the teacher guides the students to trace the melody line with their hands, helping them visualize pitch more clearly. During rhythm exercises, students are asked to imagine holding an oar and rowing through the water in time with the music-one stroke corresponds to a strong beat, while a gentle swing of the arm corresponds to a weak beat-to feel the driving rhythm of the 6/8 time signature. [10]

In part-singing exercises, the teacher first sings the melody in the higher part while the students perform the

corresponding hand gestures in sync. Then, the lower part takes over and repeats the same exercise. Finally, the students divide themselves into two groups and begin singing. With clear hand gestures to serve as cues, students can quickly identify their own part and are no longer easily thrown off track.

Through observation, it was found that while this teaching method significantly improved pitch accuracy, some students still struggled to hit high notes or even produced off-key sounds because they were singing too forcefully. [11] Regarding rhythm and part coordination, most students were able to sway and sing in time with the teacher's gestures; however, at breathing points, some children would still rush ahead or lag behind the beat because they failed to keep up with the teacher's gestures, resulting in an uneven performance.

Reflecting on these observations, it becomes clear that while these strategies do help students understand and perceive pitch, rhythm, and vocal part coordination to a certain extent, there is still insufficient attention paid to how to synchronize more precisely with the teacher's gestures and to accommodating individual differences among students. Children who strain to hit high notes mistakenly believe that singing louder will help them reach those notes—a common misconception in elementary school music education. [12] To address this, teachers can incorporate a comparison exercise involving soft singing in the next lesson, allowing students to experience for themselves which approach produces a more stable performance. For issues with rushing or lagging behind the beat, teachers can use anticipatory hand gestures as cues and provide appropriate direction during the next performance to synchronize students' breath control and singing.

To improve vocal part coordination, a "gesture relay" exercise can be incorporated later on: while the higher voices sing the first half of a phrase using gestures, the lower voices silently sing along in their minds using the corresponding gestures. This not only reinforces the independence of each vocal part but also cultivates their awareness of two-way coordination—reading gestures while listening to the vocal parts.

3. The Practical Value of Action Research in Elementary School Choral Education and Its Integration with Academic Frontiers

3.1. Practical Value

Applying action research to choral instruction for pieces like "A Joyful Dream" offers significant value for both elementary school music classrooms and teachers themselves. For elementary school music classrooms, teachers can use appropriate and effective methods to conduct choral instruction, which not only meets the requirements for choral instruction outlined in the new curriculum standards but also enhances students' musical literacy and practical skills. For teachers, utilizing the "plan, act, observe, reflect" model inherent in action research allows them to identify teaching issues more precisely and make targeted adjustments, thereby avoiding a haphazard approach to instruction. This makes teaching objectives clearer and ensures that teaching methods better align with students' actual needs. Furthermore, the process of implementing action research subtly enhances the

professional competence of elementary school music teachers. Through continuous observation, reflection, and summarization during lessons, teachers not only develop keen classroom awareness but are also compelled to continually learn new teaching concepts and methods to enhance their professional competence and literacy, thereby improving the quality of their instruction.

3.2. Integration with Embodied Cognition Theory

Embodied cognition theory emphasizes the central role of the body in the cognitive process, positing that cognition is the product of the interaction between the body, the environment, and activity. It highlights the embodied, contextual, metaphorical, and experiential nature of cognition and advocates for the close integration of the brain, the body, and the environment.

When using action research methods to teach the choral piece "A Joyful Dream," the integration of this approach with embodied cognition theory was evident on multiple occasions. For example, when correcting pitch, instead of simply having students sing along with the piano repeatedly to find the right notes, I had them draw melody lines while following the music, letting the ups and downs of the melody guide their fingertips; when singing low notes, I had them stand on their tiptoes and use the force of their feet pressing down on the ground to feel the notes sinking; when singing an octave higher, I had them raise their hands above their heads into a pointed shape, as if trying to push against something with their heads, and lean their bodies upward to find the sensation of the high note. The same applies to feeling the 6/8 time signature. Instead of simply telling students the theory of "strong-weak-weak-sub-strong-weak-weak" as in traditional teaching, I have them sway their bodies to the music, mimicking the motion of rowing—with the forceful strokes corresponding to the strong beats and the gentle swaying of the arms in between corresponding to the weak beats. This hands-on approach to physical perception is far more effective than hearing an explanation repeated countless times. Similarly, physical engagement is essential when experiencing vocal part coordination. [13] When using Colvin hand signs to aid instruction, students use the signs to identify pitch—which sign corresponds to which note and where the pitch is located—all becomes crystal clear.

These approaches break away from the traditional, auditory-focused model of choral instruction. Students are no longer passive listeners; instead, they use their entire bodies to feel and experience music, deepening their understanding of musical knowledge and emotions and enhancing the effectiveness of instruction. The integration of action research methods with embodied cognition theory has promoted the development and enhancement of students' core competencies. The teaching model has shifted from the traditional "teacher teaches, students learn" approach to one where teachers and students engage in collaborative practice within the classroom. This not only achieves a unity of body and mind but also lays a solid foundation for students to develop a lifelong love for and enjoyment of music.

4. Research Limitations and Future Directions for Teaching

4.1. Limitations of This Action Research

This paper conducted a small-scale classroom action

research study using only a single fourth-grade choral piece, “Happy Dreams.” Given the small sample size and the fact that the study subjects were limited to middle elementary grades, the applicability of the research conclusions is somewhat limited. Additionally, the research period was relatively short, completing only a partial cycle of “planning, action, observation, and reflection,” and the exploration of long-term strategies for enhancing students’ choral abilities was somewhat insufficient.

4.2. Ideas for Expanding Future Choral Instruction

In light of the limitations of the above action research, I propose the following ideas for improving choral instruction in the future:

4.2.1. Expand the Scope of Action Research

Extend the research to different grade levels, such as lower and upper grades, and select choral pieces in various styles—including cheerful, lyrical, and march-like pieces—to compare the differences in the application of action research and embodied cognition in choral instruction across different age groups and musical styles, thereby developing standardized teaching strategies for each grade level.

4.2.2. Extend the Action Research Cycle

Conduct long-term, cyclical research spanning multiple class periods and units. Track changes in students’ pitch accuracy, part coordination, and confidence in singing over the course of a semester, and explore a long-term training system capable of continuously enhancing students’ choral proficiency.

4.2.3. Integrate Digital Teaching Tools

Given today’s advanced digital environment, multimedia resources—such as audio accompaniments with separate vocal parts and visual melody animations—can be appropriately incorporated into the planning phase of action research. These resources should be combined with physical movements during instruction to further reduce issues such as confusion over vocal parts and pitch inaccuracies, while also stimulating students’ interest.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the application of action research in elementary school choral instruction, using the choral section of “A Joyful Dream” from the Renyin Edition of the fourth-grade elementary school textbook (first semester) as a case study. Through the cyclical model of “planning, action, observation, and reflection” inherent in action research, the paper examines and reflects on issues such as pitch accuracy, rhythm, and part coordination that arise in choral instruction, thereby validating the feasibility of this approach. Overall, the action research method is highly compatible with elementary school choral instruction; it effectively meets the practical needs of such instruction, helping teachers continuously optimize their teaching methods and improve their professional skills through practice. At the same time, the integration of the action research method with cutting-edge

educational theories such as embodied cognition further enriches the content and form of elementary school instruction, providing strong support for enhancing the scientific rigor and effectiveness of teaching. In future choral instruction, teachers should actively employ the action research approach, continuously explore and innovate teaching strategies based on actual classroom conditions, balance differentiated instruction with diverse classroom assessments, and proactively integrate digital tools and other equipment. This will ensure that choral instruction truly becomes an effective method for cultivating students’ musical literacy, teamwork skills, and aesthetic sensibilities, thereby promoting the sustainable development of elementary music education.

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